

PR297

A PLEASURE READER

1.95

JAIL MATE

BY CARL CORLEY

NOT FOR SALE TO MINORS



Pepper Lorrie, snapping black eyes and soft, flowing neat white hair was out to avenge the heterosexuals of the world by ruining one rich homosexual. Human sexuality encompasses a broad range of behavior within which lie both the exclusive heterosexual and the exclusive and confirmed homosexual. Between these two exclusive extremes, there are individuals in whom a heterosexual preference is predominant but who will, under certain circumstances (such as imprisonment) become involved in homosexual behavior, and persons whose main erotic attraction is to members of their own sex but who will occasionally seek out heterosexual experiences," reads **The Final Report of the Task Force on Homosexuality**. The three of them, Otis and Sharkey and Pepper, had plotted and schemed while serving their prison terms, and now, at last, the time had arrived to carry out their plan. The best laid plans and all that, the only thing they forgot to count on was human response and feeling and the appeal of one Gill St. Julien...

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A beautiful young stud by the name of Pepper Lorrie stepped off a watermelon truck while it was still running and bounced up the filthy steps which lead to the French Market in New Orleans. That was on Friday, May 11, 1967. It was around four o'clock in the afternoon. He went under the pink stucco arch, down the long columned facade heaped with vegetables and fruit for sale, and to the cafe on the far end called the Cafe Dumonde.

The cafe was located on the corner of Decatur and St. Ann, in the busiest portion of the market, its Paris-like sidewalk entrance facing an island of flaming azaleas, a park, and Jax's brewery. It's canvas canopy and open terrace brought in Jackson Square, the stream of tourists, the old horse-drawn surreys, the supply vans bringing in vegetables and chickens and cured meats directly from the hundreds of Louisiana farms.

The cafe was overly crowded, tourists and hippies and dock hands which Pepper's gaze raked over as he made his way between the rows of tables and sat down at one facing the retaining wall. With his snapping black eyes he gave the crowds a thorough scrutiny then took inventory of himself.

He was wearing faded Levi's, a cowboy jumper cut Eisenhower style, buff boots, worn but still good. In fact, they were perfect for his purpose, for they displayed the shape of his beautiful feet, the trimness of his ankles, the butchiness he wanted so brashly to advertise.

All I need is a clean shirt, he concluded to himself, as he sniffed at the sweaty blue one he was wearing. Then, I'll be in costume.

At the word... costume... he smiled to himself. Not since his year in prison at Angola had he had the opportunity to dress as he pleased. Even during his six months parole, working in the strawberry fields in Hammond, he hadn't actually had a chance to doll himself up.

"Well, all that crap's behind me," he mused, rubbing his fine, clean hands together, like Pilate washing his hands of Christ. *I'm not ever going to work or go hungry or go back to the can again.*

Pepper had a plan!

He was still young. He still had his good looks. He had a pair of bright, black eyes that could receive and deliver the right messages. He had a riot of blond hair on his head that was his badge of male beauty, and a quick-witted guile that would win for him the things he wanted.

Having rested a bit from the joggling watermelon truck that had brought him in from Hammond, and watching the flashy crowds,

he felt festive. In fact, he looked and felt cocky.

"Just play it cool, Pepper baby," he said aloud, mumbling the words. He watched two men swishing it down the street in front of Jackson Square.

Fruits!

His new profession. He'd score and they'd pay plenty for his services. He wasn't no greenhorn. Hadn't he slept with his uncle enough to know what it was all about? And while in prison, he would have to be dumb and blind not to see.

A waiter startled him out of his moonspinning by saying, "What'll you have, sir?"

Pepper jumped.

"Oh!" he ordered a cup of coffee and a sweet roll.

In a moment the waiter was back. Pepper fumbled in his Levi's and came up with the proper change. He lay it gently, almost obediently on the table, a habit borne out of prison life.

"Thanks," the waiter said. He was young, Pepper noticed, French-looking, hardly out of his teens. He gave Pepper the eye then slid through the maze of people and tables.

Pepper gave him the finger.

"Too young," he surmised, watching the kid shake his behind. "If I'm going to drop my load it's got to be with somebody with lots of bread."

It was for this reason that Pepper had come to New Orleans in the first place, to drop his load many times if necessary, and to a certain person on which he had been schooled previously while in Angola.

"That Gill St. Julien is the fruit for you," Otis Pigott had informed him, Pepper's best-liked cellmate. "He's loaded with bread, see. Your perfect score. Just the guy you want to use as a target. Nobody, just nobody gets by that fancy fruit, and I mean noooobody! He can spot a hustler a mile away. Just your speed, Pepper boy. He goes for 'em tough... and purty... like you. That blond mop you got is going to put his eyes out and that prick dangling between your legs is going to make him get down and crawl."

Pepper had been all out to get even ever since an inmate raped him late one evening in the car tag shop.

"You had it coming," the big raper had said gruffly, after the bloody ordeal was over and Pepper sat whimpering in a dark corner. "Kid, you just had no business taking hold of my rod in the shower. That's a dead come on. But you stick it out with me, be my girlboy. I won't let any of 'em other sex-starved turds get at you. I'll look after you, kid, honest... like you was a real woman."

Pepper had stuck it out with him. Mainly for his own

protection. He knew that if he did not put out to the big guy named Sharkey Rider he would squeal to the other inmates, and he would wind up like Tweedy York, a good-looking kid who had been passed around to every sodomizer in the prison.

"When you blow this joint," Otis had advised, "head for New Orleans. In the Quarter fruits are working like flies round a cowpile. It's a cinch, he had added, cock-sure in his knowledge. Otis was originally from Belle Chasse, a little village south of New Orleans, and he had grown up and in the Quarter and the Vieux Carre. "This Gill St Julien you keep bugging me about has a richy pad on Rampart, more bread than the U.S. mint. A sculptor or something fruity like that. A good-looking guy though, even if he is a queer. A real score."

The day Pepper got out of Angola, Otis said, "Just play it cool, man, cool, and you'll slide into the bread like your ass was buttered."

So Pepper considered that he was playing it cool as he sat eating his sweet roll and coffee. The young swishy waiter returned, and with a big smile.

"Want your coffee heated up a little?" he asked, holding up a sterling silver coffee decanter.

"I could use a little," Pepper said, trying to avoid him with his eyes.

The kid filled his cup. He wanted to linger. He fussed with a sugar bowl, the napkins.

"New here?" he asked.

"Hell no," Pepper answered. "Come to this joint every day."

The kid jumped. "Well! I've never seeeen you!"

Pepper shot him a wicked glance. "Well you don't have to make a major production out of it."

The kid batted his eye-lids.

"Well, I know everybody who comes to the Dumonde, that is, the young ones anyway. Oh, I don't mean those goddamned tourists. They make me sick." He waved a hand. "But the good-looking ones... and you are good-looking."

Pepper kept his head purposely down.

"In what way?"

The kid was all aflutter then.

"Your hair for one thing. Tell me, is..."

"No, it ain't dyed," Pepper answered before the kid got the question out.

"Well, I'll declare. It sure is... light."

"I'm a Viking," Pepper said with sarcasm.

The kid became bolder by the second. Pepper knew what he was leading up to. Pepper glanced around.

"Aren't you neglecting your customers?"

"Who gives a shit about them?"

"Your boss maybe."

"That old auntie."

Now he had let the cat out of the bag.

Pepper lifted an eyebrow and gazed up at him from the top of his eyes. The kid didn't have to advertise.

"What does that make you?" Pepper questioned.

The kid said shyly, "A young auntie... I suppose."

"You're not going to be either one for long if you don't let up on that pelvis rolling."

The kid's face flushed.

"I can't help it, I reckon. Born to swing!" He let out a brave little chuckle that annoyed Pepper to no end.

The kid added, "You've been around, lots, haven't you?"

"Well, I do recognize a fairy when I see one," Pepper remarked.

"Well, now that we're properly introduced," the kid said, "would you like a blow job?" He all but whispered this.

Pepper's gaze went over him like daggers.

"Got any money?"

"Will ten do?"

"I guess it'll have to do," Pepper grunted. "What about your tips?"

The kid's face clouded.

"Just pocket change."

"Hand it over, and the ten."

The kid backed back a step.

"In advance," he questioned. "How do I know you'll keep your side of the bargain?"

"My word," Pepper replied. "I'm a hustler, and it's good business."

"Very well," the kid said, laying the money on the table, like he was making change. "Go to the men's room in the Dago bar across the street. I'll meet you there in a minute."

"Is it safe?" Pepper asked, getting up from the table.

"Take the booth on the end. Leave the door unlocked."

Pepper saluted the kid by slicing the air with the flat of his hand and went down the steps and across the street. The bar was lined with winos who sat like mummies on the swivel stools, their glazed eyes looking beyond time and place. Pepper went down the length of the dimly lit room and into the toilet. The booth the kid suggested was empty. He went inside and pulled down his Levi's and jockey shorts. While he waited he smoked a cigarette. In a few minutes the kid came in. He eased the door open, slid in, and bolted the lock.

"You're beautiful," the kid said, his gaze going over Pepper's body in one startling glance.

"Let's cut out the jabbering," Pepper said, taking his

prick in his right hand and skinning it back so that the head protruded. "If you want it here it is. It's all yours. You paid for it."

"Thanks," the kid answered. He sat on the toilet seat and sucked Pepper's prick into his mouth. He went at it like a veteran. Pepper watched, a little pleased with himself. He knew he was well-hung, with plenty of dark, curly crotch hair, and he had good balls too. Fruits had always gone for it like a chicken after a worm. His prick was all slick now from the kid's wet lips, and shone in the eerie light. Someone came into the men's room and stood at the trough. Pepper and the kid froze for a moment. They listened to the sound of falling water. When it ceased and the shuffle of the man's feet died away the kid began to suck again. This time he enveloped Pepper's prick completely with his mouth, sliding back and forth so that his lips buried up in Pepper's crotch hair. As he sucked he let out little contented groans and sighs.

The continuous sucking and the warm pressures of the kid's lips and tongue felt wonderful to Pepper, though he hated to admit it. And he spread his thighs further apart and hunched forward with his pelvis. Tense, cautious of their location, Pepper helped it on with his hand, and shot his sperm at the instant the boy's lips were closed around the tip end of his prick. The sperm went all over the boy's face. Pepper kept on sperming until the last drop spurted out onto the kid. He just sat there on the toilet with the white sperm dripping off his chin, his eyes rolled back, his expression like that of a spanked child. When Pepper was through the kid took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. Then, lovingly, he kissed Pepper's prick. Pepper pulled up his Jockey shorts and Levi's.

"Thanks again," the kid said, unlocking the door and hurrying out.

Pepper followed shortly. He stood at the bar and ordered a beer. The bartender looked at him oddly, but said nothing. Pepper wondered if the man knew about the kid, what was going on.

"That punk lives in the pissery," said an old man who sat next to Pepper. "Comes in here a million times a day. Must have diarrhea."

"What punk?" Pepper said, pretending innocence.

The old wino pointed across the street.

"That works over there. He followed you in a moment ago. You couldn't of missed him."

"I was in a booth," Pepper said, rolling the beer in the can.

The old man's eyes came to life. He glared at Pepper. Pepper gulped down his drink, and a moment later he was back on

the street. He did not glance in the direction of the cafe as he made his way through the milling swarms. On the corner was a book shop. He went in. About ten or twelve young punks were crowded around a certain section of the book racks.

Looking at fuck books, thought Pepper as he eased down the isle and joined them. They didn't pay him any attention, hardly looking up from their selected novel. His gaze scanned the shelves. He picked up one that looked promising. It was titled: BENEATH APOLLO'S THIGHS. About fruits!

Well, he could teach them a thing or two.

A man came and stood beside him. He was in his middle thirties, old to Pepper's standards, but nicely groomed. He looked like an intellectual.

"Hi," he said to Pepper. "Nice night, isn't it?"

"Nice for what?" Pepper replied.

The man laughed.

"For reading," he said. He picked up one of the paperbacks. The cover was bright yellow. It was so bright it made yellow reflections on the man's hands. The title was in bold black. Pepper glanced over, read the title. He shrugged.

"Frankly I prefer westerns," the man said. "No sex."

Pepper gave him the once over.

"What you got against sex?"

"Nothing," the man answered. "Frankly, I adore it. But when I have sex I have only sex and when I read I read. Everything can't be sex."

Pepper grunted, still looking at his novel. "It's got it's place."

"Do you like to play around?" the man asked.

"It's according to how much money is in it for me."

"How does twenty grab you?"

"The price is right, if what you have on mind is right."

"I like to suck on a boy's rod."

Now there was bluntness for you. Just come right out and say it.

"I just blowed about ten minutes ago," Pepper said, then could have bit his own tongue. What the guy didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"That doesn't matter," the man said, putting back the novel where he found it. "You don't have to come. I just like your looks. Bet you got a nice one."

"Well, its never won a Miss America contest," Pepper said, "but I've never heard no complaints."

"There is a vacant hallway back of the Pontalba apartments," the man said. "It's safe."

He led the way. They went around the corner where a group of tourists were laughingly climbing into an old surrey driven

by a black, top-hatted Negro and to the rear of the Pontalba. There was a moldy courtyard lined with banana trees planted in huge oil jars. They went through a green latticed door, like in the old western saloons, and into a dark hall. A couple were occupying the hall, two young men locked in each other's embrace. They did not even look up when Pepper and the man entered.

Without delay, the man fumbled at Pepper's belt slipped down his Levi's and shorts, and caught hold of Pepper's prick. His hand was huge and warm and went over Pepper's prick in firm, deliberate strokes. It brought about a quick hard, then he bent over, clutching Peppers behind in both hands and began to suck on Pepper s prick.

There was another couple laying on the rotten floor in the corner. They were groping for each other, their slacks to their knees. One of them glanced at Pepper and smiled. Pepper blushed.

The man got out his own prick and began to jerk off while he was sucking on Pepper. When he came he raised up and put his prick back in his pants. Then he redressed Pepper.

"Let's go," he said. Outside in the courtyard he withdrew his wallet and handed Pepper a twenty. "It was well worth it," he said, smiling dolefully. "Hope we meet again." He shook Pepper's hand as if they had settled a business deal, then disappeared through the alley.

For a moment Pepper remained in the courtyard and smoked a cigarette. The two men were still embracing when the latticed door opened and they came out into the courtyard.

As they floated past, arm in arm, one of them said to the other, but directed at Pepper, "What a gorgeous numbaar!"

Pepper gave them his go-to-hell look, couldn't stomach fags. He wondered how the other two in the hallway were making out. Now and then their voices drifted out into the night. When Pepper finished his cigarette he returned to Decatur street. More people were out now, infiltrating the narrow sidewalks and bars and cafes and into the Square.

Though he did not know why, he returned to the Cafe Dumonde. This time he found a table just off the sidewalk where he could view the people and they could get the hustler's view of him, his thighs invitingly spread, that pose of nonchalance and studness essential to hustling.

The kid that had blowed him was occupied with another stud, paying no attention to Pepper whatsoever, as though they had not shared an intimacy, and it was a young girl this time who came to wait on him. Again he ordered sweet rolls, and sat musing as he watched the night people go by.

With all this occupation with sex, he began to realize that he was going to really make out in New Orleans, like his friend

Otis had said. There sure was plenty of it in this old rotten city, and it looked like half the population was blowing the other half. Of course, he had but one objective in mind, to find the man Otis had advised him to find. He failed, however, to understand within himself the sentence to which he would condemn himself in the quest, to even rationalize in his all delirious ultimatum to locate this one man, to find this total stranger called Gill St. Julien, and the role he was to play in relation of one man against the other. Also, so certain he was of victory, of triumph, his one weapon being youth, he did not bother to realize nor analyze the depth, the sacrifice to which he would engage his spirit so that he may lay upon the altar of his conscience the spoils of Gill St. Julien's total and complete devastation.

Had he known, had he listened to the fatal sign which heralded to him from the lonely nightpeople haunting the square, he would still have gone on in his frantic quest, to fulfill the oath of his awesome vendetta, even if that fulfillment meant his own destruction.

One's Gods must at all cost go clear of blame.

When he completed his roll and coffee he threw the cost on the table with a jingle of coins and took the little sidewalk which skirted the Square and in the direction of Jax's brewery. It was a nice night to be out, warm and thick with the humidity and smells from off the river, and he made his way over the little bridge and onto the Toulouse street docks. With his hands thrust into his pockets, a cigarette dangling from his lips, he walked the length of the dock, then on down to Bienville to where a ferry to Algiers lay moored, ready to take on passengers. A number of people strolled about, or just stood idly by as if undecided whether to take the ferry or remain on the city side. Though many were paired off, some males with males and females with females, laughing softly and clouding the night with cigarette smoke, their gaze on him when he passed were dark and hollow and advertised a loneliness as acute as his own. Pepper didn't want to be lonely. He was too cocksure of himself to consider loneliness. Yet, healthy and filled with youth, and as eager and mistrustful of self as youth is, he felt alive in his groin, eager and curious and hungry. He wanted fulfillment. He hadn't had a piece of ass since that little Mexican girl in Hammond. A slut, he recalled, spitting on the rough wooden planks of the dock, who smelled like wet strawberries and raunchy perfume and her time of the month.

He eye-balled a cunt making her lone way down the steep, wooden steps to the brightly-lit ferry. Her hair was like moonlight, styled Camelot, and a guitar was flung over one shoulder. The way she turned her head and returned his gaze,

bottle-necking the twin rows of people going down the steps, he knew he could get that... but at a price. He jingled the change in his pockets, played pocket pool for a brief instant of substituted relief, and considered. He'd better hang on to what money he had, if worse came to worse before he matched swords and wits with this Gill St. Julien. Food in his gut was a far cry better than a good fuck, with nothing left but a sour memory. Even if he got her, he shrugged, what then? Hell! It would only be a piece of ass and nothing else. He'd probably never set eyes on her again. If he did, he reasoned, she would probably be with some other hard tail with a bone on anxious to pack her with his meat.

Love! What in the hell was love any more? Diana Valette from down Golden Meadow way, a hot little Cuban, had taught him long before he stood time up at the university that a man shouldn't expect nothing but trouble and expense from a cunt.

He bought a one-way ticket in the little corrugated tin dock house and went aboard the ferry. He located a rail that wasn't occupied far up on the second deck, braced his weight against it, and watched the cars as they circled the ramp and came aboard. The sounds, as they rumbled over the metal drawbridge, made an awesome clatter, and their headlights bobbing up and down were like arc-lights in Hollywood picking out the marquee at a movie premiere.

Hell! Wish I was in Hollywood right now, he mumbled to himself, feeling a tinge of pity well up inside him. I'd make all them rich cocksuckers get down and beg, and they'd pay for my services too, he reasoned coldly. While in Angola he had talked to an inmate who had lived it up in Bel Air, was hung like a plow mule from Texas and got in with some movie producer who couldn't leave him alone. An apartment, clothes, a new car, plenty of spending bread... just by putting up with the old joker's swinging on his rod.

Well, I've got this St. Julien, he said to himself tiredly, almost with the assurance of one who knew the man intimately. It never dawned on him that he may never get the chance to see, or meet his well-sought prey... that their paths may never cross. It never dawned on him either that his life might take an unexpected turn, and for the worse, a path down which he would tread and over which he would have no control. He possessed but this one weapon, his youth, and he did not consider that he would need a brain and much cunning to outwit the night-hunters who prowled the dark inroads for him.

For instance, at that very moment one of those sex-hungry prowlers was taking a bead on him with a gaze that looked hypnotic from the aft of the ferry. A moment more and the night-form was leaning on the iron rail beside him. At first, Pepper

did not pay him much mind, for his attention was drawn to the opposite shoreline where a spray of shorelights made nervous reflections in the water.

"Got a light?" the nightman said as though he was the original inventor of the phrase.

Shit! Pepper fumed beneath his breath. Can't they ever think of a new way to do their scoring. Pepper did not have to turn and look at the man to determine what he was after. The man wanted his cock. It was as simple as that.

"My ass and your face," Pepper answered the man, still not turning.

"Didn't mean no offense," the man said, apologetic, moving closer.

Pepper baited him, with nothing else better to do. The same old crap, in Hammond and Baton Rouge and Lake Charles and now this rotten shit hole.

"What did you mean... then?"

"Cain't a guy ask a kid for a match for his cigarette without signing an act of congress?"

"'Course, you don't have a match, do you?" Pepper said coldly. "Bet you got a half dozen brands from every lousy dump in the quarter, plus a couple of dollar lighters."

The man laughed softly.

"Wanna search me? Go ahead, kid, treat me like you was the fuzz."

At that. Pepper turned and took inventory of the man in one glance. The dock from the Algiers shoreline splashed gaily against his downcast face, and his deeply entrenched profile, and that one word "fuzz" seemed to make of them standing there anything but strangers. He saw that it was a long, lean face, high of cheekbone and square of chin, and that his mouth was large, a narrow slit, almost from ear to ear. He was wearing long sideburns, and his long wavy hair looped in thick compact shrouds over his brow. Though he could but catch fleeting glimpses of his eyes they appeared dark, sinister, and had roving lights in them... like the almost sad eyes of that Guy Heathcliff, Pepper concluded, who played in the movie *Wuthering Heights*.

"My name's Anson Lemarque," the man introduced himself, thrusting out one long, bony hand. Reluctantly, Pepper took it. Scores seldom shook hands, except upon occasion once the sex scene was over and the cash was exchanged hands.

Maybe this joker from the Batman wasn't no fairy?

Pepper told him his.

"Alone in the Crescent city?" this Anson asked, leaning closer, ignoring the two teen-aged strollers who swept by arm in arm.

Pepper confirmed that he was. The situation was getting warm. As a ruse, Pepper slipped down the rail another foot.

"I'm not the son of Frankenstein," Anson declared, furrowing his brow. "Nor the law, nor a pusher... nor a derelict soused on Jamaica rum." Pepper raked his gaze over him, seeing but the shadow of him in the uncertain darkness.

"Didn't say you were... why in the name of Christmas are you bugging me? Can't you land a score... in this flea-bitten rat hole? I could have scored a hundred times already tonight," Pepper told him, staring at the black water rolling beneath him. "Every guy I meet gives me the fisheye. You'd think all they lived on was come."

Anson laughed. This seemed to amuse him.

"Then... why didn't you score?" he asked, turning to seriousness.

Pepper flung him a pert look.

"I'm not in this crow's nest to score... that's why! And it's none of your Goddamned business! So why don't you blow. Can't you tell you're bugging shit outa me?"

The man was silent for an instant. Then, with boldness.

"You don't fool me... not one bit!"

"I'm not trying to fool you... get it, Frankie?"

"But you're alone," Anson said, supreme. "I've been watching you. Saw you get off that watermelon truck. You're as unsure of yourself as a Swede who's just jumped some foreign ship."

Pepper gave him stare for stare.

"You some kind of lousy pigeon? Paid to watch me, tail my every move? If you are, I took a piss down on St. Philip. Missed that, didn't you. Betta get out your little black book and jot that down."

"Good God! I'm no fool pigeon." The tone of his voice mellowed. "I just took a shine to you, Pepper."

"Well... take a shine to somebody else." Pepper thumped his cigarette into the water. "I'm not selling."

"Be worth your while."

Pepper turned to him and smiled.

"I read you from the first, didn't I?"

"Not exactly."

"You sex starved cats don't fool me. I can read one from a mile. You think I ain't been around? Listen eh... Anson Lemarque... or whoever you are... I've been blowed! I ain't been living in no tree, man!"

Anson turned a satisfied expression to the watery light.

"You might be in for a surprise."

"That's what you think," Pepper came back tartly. "I've had every kind of fruit there is, see. You name em, and I've had

'em."

"Would you like to prove that?"

"What are you, some kind of smart-ass?"

Pepper thought for a second.

"What can you afford to pay me? I don't come cheap?"

The man answered without hesitation.

"I'll give you fifty."

Pepper lit another cigarette. And this time he offered Anson a light.

"Where's your stinking pad?"

The man swallowed hard.

"It's on Behrman Avenue, near the Naval Station," he said finally.

IT WAS A STINKING PAD!

To Pepper, though he had been in and out of some dumps in his time, he could hardly stomach the place. He followed the tall, gaunt man up a flight of moldy steps at the rear of a mortar building styled in the vanishing facade of the Spanish Dons, the nobles who had once owned Louisiana because it had been gifted by a cousin prince from France, and had lost it again to a Frenchman who fought to gain it back.

At the top floor, they paused on a rickety back porch laden with damp potted plants green with mildew while the man called Anson fumbled for his keys. Opening a glass paneled door, he escorted Pepper up another flight of stairs... these indoors... but worse than the outside ones for wear, the rotten wallpaper clinging to the filthy walls and looking like ghosts by the light of a single bulb extending from the ceiling by a fly-specked cord. It swayed from the river breeze from an opened window as they went up, flinging their shadows like bats flying from a cave. At the top, where several doors creaked at their approach, the man unlocked still another entrance way and invited Pepper in with the manners and hospitality of a Southern gentleman living in a mansion.

He switched on the light. The wallpaper was a grocery bag brown, and clung to the walls and dark ceiling in long tattered streams. Dark stains clung to the paper, lighter squares where pictures had hung, and splotched in others as if blood had been flung in some awesome struggle. There was one straight-backed chair, a wooden table, and a bed with lacy ironwork like those gold beds in movies occupied by whores.

"You've really got class?" Pepper said with a low grunt as his gaze cased the place. "Real class! Why didn't you tell me you owned the hotel Astor?"

"Saving that for a surprise," Anson said, panning it off with a smile. "It's not just anybody I invite to this place."

"Well, I can imagine! A man with your reputation must be careful. Riff raff would ruin you. Nothing but blue-book for YOU!"

"Well, I do try and be discreet."

Pepper headed for the door.

"See you round."

"Now wait a minute," the man said, taking hold of the door and turning the key in the lock. "A bargain is a bargain."

"I ain't seen no fifty cabbage leaves yet!"

Without a word, the man took some bills from his pocket, counted out fifty and handed them to Pepper.

"I never go back on my word."

Pepper took the bills and crammed them in his slacks. His gaze went over the shabby room once more. Then over the man called Anson.

NOW HERE WAS REAL TRASH FOR YOU!

Anson began to take off his clothes. Though his clothes were soiled and ill-kept, like some creep from one of those gangster flicks, thought Pepper, when he stood completely naked in the dim light his body did look freshly bathed. He was hard of muscle, to say the least, the veins showed heavily, his arms and neck and face deeply tanned along those areas exposed by the sun. And he had good bone structure, without an excess inch of fat, thin and hard around the middle, sound of thigh and chest, and pelted with a black coat of hair as thickly scattered as an apes.

"I'm a dock hand," he explained, noticing Pepper's gaze go over him. "Been lugging bananas since I was thirteen. I ain't no lily white softy... like you thought."

"I can see that," Pepper said, his gaze roving over Anson's body. His eyes dragged toward his groin where he studied his prick and balls hanging from their nest of coarse black hair, the veins running up each side of his navel to disappear at his hips. Not wanting to outwardly stare, he took quick scrutiny of his prick. It was unusually long, meaty, and strutted with thick veins that coiled and hid themselves in the mat of hair. The head hung as huge and blood-red as an apple, protruding from the layers of foreskin like the head of a turtle thrust out of its shell.

"Well... shed your duds," Anson asked, rather commanded.

Pepper did not know whether to obey or not. The shabby room, the smells, the degrading looks of the place were bad enough, without considering the savagery of this tall dock-hand who stood in the middle of the room as naked as he was born. There was no telling what this queer joker wanted from a boy, or what crazy sex thing he might do once he had taken off his clothes and revealed his body. But the fifty in his pocket was a

gigantic persuader. So he slipped out of his things and laid them carefully on the back rest of the chair.

Anson goggled him like a shark after a dolphin.

"You'll do fine," he said with a tremor to his voice, and, reaching out, he ran his callused hands down Pepper's backside. "I've had sex with about every punk in the Quarter, but I don't recall ever seeing any guy with skin as beautiful as yours... like them ripe cantaloupes in the French Market, gold and smooth as satin. And you're hung good too." He reached down and stripped Pepper's prick back and forth. "Beautifully shaped, and lots of dark curly hair ... a real gem!"

"Hope I'll do okay," Pepper said, in lieu of something better to say. But he didn't really give a damn if he would do or not. In fact, he regretted by the minute coming up here with this crazy joker, and felt dirty already, just by this man laying hands on his body... a body he had always taken genuine pride in. But what the hell, he shrugged, trying to make light of the predicament he had gotten himself into.

Anson kept fondling him, caressing his dimpled spine; his broad shoulders, the cheeks of his ass.

"You'll do okay," he praised, his gaze now insanely frightful, half-sex and half-terror, which caused Pepper to fear him. "Glad you don't have a lot of body hair, especially around your ass and legs. You're a real blond, Pepper boy, a real Hollywood blond. Suspected you'd dyed that hair until you got your clothes off. Now I know you're a blond all the way to the bone. They're my specialty. Blond and well-built and clean, like them Greek athletes. Never could stomach a black haired punk... like having sex with an ape."

You should talk! Pepper thought to himself, considering the patches of wild black hair on Anson's body. An ape would fit this son of a bitch perfectly.

Without further words, Anson slid to his knees, all the while clinging to Pepper's hips and thighs with long, hard fingers. Then, taking a set of false teeth out of his enormous mouth, he sucked Pepper's prick in between his lips and over his tongue.

Though Pepper was an old experienced hand at being sucked, queer bait as most regarded him, with his shiny blond hair and blond features, and had been pawed and whistled at and courted and made love to by men of every walk of life, he suddenly loathed this man's touch, and felt none of the sexual sensation he had experienced with others. So he just stood there in the wretched, rotten room, smelling the rancid odors of spoiled food trapped for days, of mold and mildew and decay, his thighs awkwardly spread, while the man got his kicks.

Now and then he would steal a glance at him, watching with

loathing how his dark head bobbed up and down, his wet lips turning in and out, his hairy arms and hands as they clung to his smooth clean body by contrast, and wanted to be sick. Though he had an erection he did not feel nor contribute to the man's passion, and forced, through his drawn attention elsewhere, the man to literally take his pleasure. The sounds too filled him with hatred. The sucking and lapping, the wet sloshing of flesh devouring flesh, like a hungry dog grabbing over a dirty bone.

In his bewilderment, with the sounds and motions of this man on his hands and knees laboring with a passion suddenly alien and nauseating, the toothless mouth gumming his organ, he gazed out the fly specked window, a window with neither curtain nor shade. Down in the Naval yard sailors were changing guards. Their white uniforms shone cleanly in the light of the street lamps. They were young, like him, clean, athletic, the prize of the Navy, of America, the most masculine of young men, and at the sight of them marching across the concrete apron, rifles like gleaming swords piercing the darkness, the sounds of their hard soled boots on the pavement turned his heart sick. In almost thwarted rage he jerked his prick out of the man's mouth.

"What the hell?" the man said, looking cheated.

"You bite," Pepper lied, having not prepared an adequate answer for his outrage.

"Like hell I bite," Anson flung back. "With my teeth in my hand. Now come on, Pepper. I want your come... gotta drink your come."

Pepper felt helpless, defeated. He refused to look out the window again. It was like seeing his own sentence nailed to the sky.

"I need to jack it a little," he said, making excuses.

Anson waited, his mouth but a few inches from Pepper's prick, his tongue going in and out between his gums like a frog's at a fly.

Desperately, and in order to get the ordeal over with, Pepper caught up his own prick in his right hand and began to whip it into an erection. He kept his eyes closed, as if blackness could shut out the miserable scene. He tried to pretend that he was laying in his bunk at Angola, taking his needed kicks when the lights were out in the dorm. Finally he spermed. He felt Anson's lips close over the head of his prick, as he drank his come into his rotten gut.

"I couldn't expect nothing finer than that," Anson said, wiping his mouth with his mangy hand. His gaze, blaring up at Pepper, was like a whipped hound pleading to its master. "The come is sweet, when you're young, like you, Pepper... sweet and pure and sublime."

Pepper gave him a go-to-hell expression.

"Can I put on my clothes... now?"

Anson had the facial expression of one doomed to the gallows.

"Not just yet, Pepper. I gotta get mine."

Oh, Lord! What now? Pepper thought.

Anson lay back on the filthy floor that was littered with cigarette butts and spit. He slipped his legs through Pepper's, that were spread a little, and began to jack himself off, his long fingers making slicing motions as he pumped his enormous prick up and down, frantically, almost maddeningly.

Pepper only half-heartedly watched.

"Piss on me, Pepper baby," Anson implored, his eyes wild, like a crazy man's. "Go ahead, baby, piss all over me! Please!"

"Shit!" was Pepper's rasping reply.

"Please! Man... please!" Anson kept up a moan, his body completely rigid now, every bone and vein caught in the dim light in high relief. The more he pleaded the harder he beat on his prick. He beat so hard and with such struggle of rapt emotions his spine was raised a foot from the floor. Only the back of his head and his grimy heels touched.

"Fifty more... if you'll piss!" he raved on, his tongue lolling.

FIFTY MORE!

Hell, thought Pepper, he had pissed a million times for nothing. Why not piss for fifty bucks.

It was difficult. He had never pissed on a guy before. He had heard about such kooky men before, and thought it an easy task. But it wasn't. Just how did one guy piss on another? He looked down at the miserable hunk of flesh writhing on the filthy carpet, in wild sex spasms. Suddenly he thought of prison, Sharkey Rider, what he longed to do to all them fruity queers. In silent rage, revulsion, he took his beautiful clean prick in his hand and began to piss on the lunatic below him. At first the yellow stream splattered on Anson's chest, then around his neck, like on a car. Pepper thought, when you wash it clean with a hose. Except he wasn't washing this mangy fucker clean. It was the waste from his own body that fell in hot yellow cascades.

Anson's mouth was opened now. His head was cocked back like one of them western cowboys who had bit the dust, and his eyes were all white and glassy and fixed in his skull.

Pepper aimed his prick a little higher. He pissed in Anson's mouth... and almost gladly. In a kind of silent, bitter retaliation he gloried in watching his own piss flood and fill Anson's mouth, then overflow like a rain barrel and stream down each side of his neck to stain the already stinking floor.

About the same instant Anson shot his sperm. It bursted

from the head of his prick, made a tall white arch then fell back over his twisting, manipulating fingers. Anson then let out weird animal moans that send cold chills up Pepper's spine.

Lifeless, rapt and spent, Anson fell back on the carpet in a limp, sweaty heap. Like a dying man the whites of his eyes showed and he smacked his lips, drying up Pepper's hot piss.

In complete, acid disgust, Pepper stepped over the man's body and as quickly go into his clothes. Careful to check his money, but still not daring to look at the collapsed ape on the floor, he headed for the door.

"Well... good-bye, motherfucker!" he said, taking hold of the latch.

"It's locked ... will have to open it," Anson said, getting faintfully to his feet. He fumbled in his pockets, withdrew his key, and unlocked the door. "You don't have to leave... just yet?" he pleaded.

"You've got your lousy kicks," Pepper said coldly, now that his own passion was spent. "I got my lettuce... so we're both satisfied." He turned the knob.

Like one struck in the belly, Anson fell back on the rancid bed. The streams of piss ran down his chest and dripped in yellow beads onto the floor.

His gaze on Pepper's was as doleful as his shame, as if, now that it was over and done, he had suddenly come to his senses.

For a curious moment Pepper paused. He had to find out what made this cat tick.

"Tell me something," he asked. "How in the motherfucking hell does a man get in your shape?" Anson did not hesitate.

"I wish I could answer that. I guess, mainly, if you insist on knowing, it's from my own rotten existence." He paused, swallowed hard, then went on. "Day in and day out, year in and year out working like a field nigger in those grimy wharfs, filthy, twenty-four hours a day, never knowing what a bath, what cleanliness really is... seeing my own gritty hide, my youth slipping through my fingers, and watching young punks stroll by the docks... I guess I flipped."

"But can t you have sex... without the piss shit?" Pepper asked bluntly. This was his manner. He knew nor understood no other.

Anson lifted his eyes sheepishly and looked at him, a long steady look. He was like a prisoner facing a judge.

"I did once... when younger. But... guess you'll think I'm on grass or something... but even since a kid I always loved to smell my own piss, my own shit. I'd sit for hours on the commode just sniffing my excretions and looking at the colors in the water. One night... one drunken night I met a broad... like me.

She was the same way, understand. So, I went down on her while she was on the john. We both loved it from then on. And," he shrugged, "from her to young studs in the French Quarter... shitboys they call them. Love to shit on you, piss on you, like you just done."

"I didn't go for it none," Pepper came back in a small fury.

"You may not believe this, Pepper," Anson went on, ignoring him. "But did you know that somewhere in Africa the natives drink their own piss. They strain it through some kind of jungle leaves then drink it like a sailor guggles hot beer."

"Didn't know that... tough shit," said Pepper sarcastically, hanging onto the door knob.

"Why, I know punks who like to fuck another punk in the ass while he is about to take a shit... say they like that hot shit burning their pricks and running down their legs while they're getting their sex kicks."

Pepper turned a gas chamber green.

"I've had it up to here," he cried defensively, and in genuine disgust. "Good-bye... you son-of-a-bitching monster!"

He left the room. He slammed the door behind him with such force the wallpaper on the walls in the semi-dark hallway, affected by the impact, split like toilet tissue and sank in tattered veils to the floor. An old woman... rather a hag... peered from a lighted entrance. She was fat and smeared with whore paint, her hair disheveled. In one fat, heavily ringed hand she held a shiny bottle of wine. She came down the hall like a shadow in a shadow. At the sight of Pepper she smiled a toothless smile, pursed her lips, and murmured drunkenly, "Gimma a kiss... peach! Gimmma kissss!"

Pepper raced down the creaky stairs. He hurried through the lower door and out onto the little porch. Two women leaned on the balustrade murmuring in tones. At his unexpected appearance they turned from their female conversations and eyed him like caparisoned saints.

"He picks 'em up younger every day," Pepper overheard one of them say to the other as he leaped down the outside stairs two steps at a time.

At the landing he bought a ticket and went aboard the ferry. It moved out into the Mississippi as noiselessly as an eel. He leaned on the rail. The fresh breeze, low over the water did little to cleanse his tortured mind. He could still smell the stench of that hot upstairs room, could still see that awesome man laying there on his back in a fit of sex. He lit a cigarette and puffed until a smoke-screen haloed him like a cloud. He hoped frantically the cigarette smoke and the smell of the tobacco would fumigate the rancidity of his person. He

sickened at the memory. Leaning over the rail he vomited quietly. Taking out a clean handkerchief he wiped his mouth, then he combed his hair.

Gill! Gill! he said aloud, shocked into soberness by the recall of his sex act. *I've got to locate Gill!*

For God sakes! All of New Orleans can't be like this! If it is, he murmured aloud, *I'll kill Otis. I swear I will!*

2

It was May 25, 1967.

Pepper crossed Canal Street... the festival of lights... and into the dark, pit-black tunnel that was Decatur at night, where no lamps along the streets glowed from their yellow, moth-infested orbs, and into the depths lined with empty trucks waiting until dawn to become a mechanical migration to ports unknown.

The hot May night was rancid with the mellow odor of vegetables stored in the tin warehouses across the street, of bass and crawfish in tanks of ice, of sweet melons and cantaloupes and garlic and hops from Jax's brewery west toward Jackson Square and the French Market.

He made his way briskly, though not hurriedly, for it was early yet, and he had been informed by several scores he had encountered that New Orleans nightlife, especially in the Quarter, did not come to life until around ten... and later in those lavender and rosy-colored lounges and bars frequented by those flaming individuals signaled out as his victims, to be dethroned, victimized, and discarded.

From a fat "juicy" score early that afternoon he had managed to secure enough to buy himself some needed clothes, and he looked a far cry different than he had looked two weeks ago when he first rode into the Quarter on a rickety watermelon truck.

He had always loved clothes, especially casual sports wear, and his year in prison had sharpened his taste, had given him ample time to pursue what would go well with his coco-colored complexion, his platinum hair, his lithe build. Clothes were a much discussed subject in prison, as it was in any branch of the armed services, and inmates expressed themselves freely, often lending advice and brazenly proclaiming what would look good or you. The drabness of prison life had added immensely to heighten this colorful interest, and usually when an inmate was ready to be paroled it was his wear which concerned him first, how he would look to the public in civilian life.

Pepper had selected a honey colored, Italian-design BanLon knit shirt, slit down the front in a wide V, a flashy black belt with a an some buckle holding up a low-rise hipster pants cut in soft eggshell white pigskin... to match his buff boots, lately brushed, and a white sailcloth, buttonless mess jacket which he carried over one shoulder with a reckless air.

And he felt reckless within, a devil-may-care attitude which engendered him to hum and sing as he penetrated further into the dark street, going nowhere in particular, but invading

everything with a zest and outburst of energy he had not felt in months. And though underneath this veneer of gaiety still lurked his secret vendetta, his motivation for migrating to New Orleans in the first place, he did not let it spoil his festive integrity. Actually, it seasoned his mood, galvanized him into joyous reunion with himself, and garnished over his old bitterness, his prolonged and active scorn.

He crossed Toulouse with a dash, all but skipping like a kid, and by the Jax's brewery, which loomed against the night sky like the shadow of an ancient castle, its forts and balustrades circling its black towers and turrets in a bold mockery of its simple architectural plan. The lapping of the waves against the wharves, churned up by the constant criss-crossing of ferries and flatboats on the Mississippi, added ominously to the haunting dark scene, and he was momentary glad when he approached St. Peter's street where the lights of Algiers winked like a ring of diamonds and the lamps in Jackson Square edged the park like a pearl necklace on an African.

Lighting a cigarette, a ready roll for a change... he had only been allowed sack tobacco at Angola... he bounced up the black steps to the square to join the stratum of society within, those nameless faces of the night lured into this hemmed-in hell that was the park.

The rich, haunting fragrance of jasmine and rose and magnolia assailed his nostrils as he took one of the flagstone paths, and the translucent sails of the banana trees, caught between him and the lamps, waved in a salty Gulf breeze like the veils on a stripper's train.

Alone, in pairs, and in small parades the hippies too were out, they pearled Jackson Square their Broadwalk, their Easter Parade, their showing off place, not there to score or to seek out equally lonely sexpartners, but to model their groovy clothes; shoulder length locks and coats trimmed in fox, shades in colors that dazzled, even in the half-darkness, shirts of color, stripes, flowers checks, coats with one button, no buttons, many buttons, and of every hue, ties four inches wide with all the colors of a northern hued sky, girls, the foxes, the babies in mini-skirts with fluorescent stockings and cat boots, yellow and orange stretch pants with leather jackets and Russian styled fur hats, the Twiggy buffs, boyish-looking girls in tailored suits and striped ties, looking so much like Bonnie and Clyde... two GIRLS... not a boy and girl, the Beatle followers, but with a "you all" and not a "hey ducky", long haired like Jesus, turtle-necked sweaters, flowered shirts combined with burgundy or gold slacks, soft leather boots to their knees with cord wrappings, like Davie Crockett and Daniel Boone, canteens slung over bony shoulders, like guitars, their

long cigarette-stained fingers piled with gaudy silver rings, wrists haloed with junk-jeweled bracelets, mustaches like Yankee Cavalrymen out of the pages of the Civil War, beards from the Old Testament, Dutch caps and silk scarfs like English Dandies.

All strange and new to Pepper Lorrie, but somehow stimulating. A conglomeration of exotic individuals, way out was word for them, high on weed, floating, ghosts moving in slow, languid strides, seemingly lost, their hair flowing with each step, bouncing, their tasseled jackets moving as if in a can-can dance, a slow, dragged out motion all their own, and in cadence to the others' steps, a slow dance without music, like a migration of birds in the sky, meandering in the fitful darkness, yet never touching.

With them, infiltrating this gory scene, one Pepper considered rakishly would fade soon on the horizons of time, were the prowlers, the flesh peddlers, the flesh seekers, one being the other's therapeutic cure, or curse, whatever the sexual toxin. Old men, young men, fat men, slim men, feminine men, butches, vagrants, pushers, ex-cons... like him... whores, dykes, sailors out on a lark, servicemen from the base on Pontchartrain beach, foreign dockhands looking for a cheap, quick thrill, winos not seeking anything, young stud hustlers idling their time, waiting for a score to show, nuns, two by two, as if their archangel did not trust them apart, and young high school girls out for sex, for the sheer sake of sex.

There were no new types to Pepper's accustomed eyes. He had rubbed elbows and behinds with them all in Angola, and he could read their kicks by heart, could glance at their faces, their eyes, their fixed expressions, expressions stamped even in the darkness, as if he was looking into a glass ball and saw what made them tick, their drives, their secret motivations, their secretive vulnerability.

Wedging through them, he crossed the Square, went through the northern gate on Chartres street, around the St. Louis Cathedral, and into the pit that was Pirate's Alley. There, two young kids, two boys hardly out of their teens, were locked in embrace, and they came unglued at his rash approach.

He went by them with a rustling of his sailcloth jacket, like the quick retaliation of a blacksnake whip, and through the shadowy hell of the Cathedral garden to Royal. There beneath a sign saying Petite Paree he halted, lit another cigarette. The light from his match revealed the shop display window, furs, gowns, the couturier of high fashion which he studied with a shrug.

Aimlessly, he moved on, thinking what the score had related to him earlier in the day. "Go to Lafitte's in Exile, my dear. It's the living end! You can score there, beautiful! Just go

down Royal... you couldn't miss that flaming joint if you were blind!"

Well... he was at last on Royal!

On this endless treadmill, golden lit, mellow with the fragrance of beer and wine and roses, he moved with the cautious, yet dominant air of a prince. Acutely conscious of his good looks, the way he had brushed his platinum hair down over his brow, brushed it until it shone like polished aluminum, he passed shop after shop, always pausing to examine his reflection in the display windows which, under the shroud of golden hues, became fascinating mirrors for him. Conscious too that others looked at him, admired him, eyed him with various degrees of passion, lust, admiration, envy, coquetry... or he thought they eyed him... his brisk walk, the stiffening of his leg muscles so that his high heeled boots made ominous and obvious clatters on the old, ancient stonewalks, enthroned him with something of wonder and deep self-allure.

So self absorbed was he in himself that he hardly paid attention to the shops he passed, buildings older than time, landmarks of New Orleans and the Vieux Carre one of the most enchanting cities in America: The Magi stacked with sacred art, the Blackamoor lined to the ceiling with antiques, Adrians, highlighted with oriental art of every description and age, the Acorn, a treasure cache of things exotique, the Foundry, a mountain of glassed in trophies of gilded mast heads, brass propellers, chandeliers, driftwood, Nina Sloss Antiques, picturesque with silken furnishings, rolls of glistening fabrics, and candle shops... candles fragrant with the perfumes of frangipani, magnolia, lime, raspberry, potpourri, wine shops, cellars oozing with the odors of flax, pottery from Oaxaca, Mexico, captain's bottles on long green glass shelves, Jersey replica decanters, apothecary jars of many colors, Hove's Parfumeur as he branched off onto Toulouse, pushed and shoved by the gaudy crowds, an alcove so thick with the fragrance of toilet waters that it drugged his mind.

Yet, drugged on self, these gorgeous shops, these glassed-in regal treasures, these priceless antiques, these golden and bejeweled heirlooms, these rich tapestries, these casually hung works of original art, rings, bracelets, broaches belonging to some dead woman out of the past, statues of pure ivory from African coasts, jars and figurines and robes from the Orient, China, Japan, were as nothing to him, for it was people who spurred him with life, vitality, not worthless objects, not tangent things which made no sense whatsoever to him, and he but wondered vaguely why they made sense to others... what meaning they held, what precious heritage that they would cling to them, embody them, restore them to former elegance, dare to sell them

at untold prices to complete strangers.

He had gone to prison for theft, had endured a year of toil and manual hardship, yet, he was surrounded by a treasure trove of worth and his eyes, his senses failed to notice, to comprehend their value, to grasp to his bosom the sacred meaning they engendered in others who owned them, and those others who craved with an obvious passion to buy them for themselves.

It was not in Pepper Louie's heritage, his upbringing, his stealthy conscience to value them, or anything like them. The values of the world he attained and kept sustained were in silver and greenbacks, pretty girls' faces, clothes, horses which he worshipped, and good times. He could have lived in a cave—prison had taught him this—and he would have never missed nor would he have longed for the niceties of life, nor would he have recognized in squalor anything to be missed, the golden glow that beauty bestows on life.

Pepper Lorrie was one of the takers of the world, not one of the builders, and the men who schooled themselves all their lives, who went to numerous universities and colleges for such adequate degrees so that they would be able to build, to create, he had absolutely nothing in common with. They belonged to one another. They to one class, he another. They to one breed, he to still another alien, discredited breed.

He would enjoy things all his life; lounges that looked like palaces, clothes elegantly tailored, lotions the labor of scientists, surrounded by great works of art, adorned with precious, intricate jewelry, would indeed gorge himself on them, yet he would be unaware of them actually and take their grandeur for granted. Just as he took for granted the splendor of this ancient old world milieu, the haunting and melancholy Vieux Carre, the fortuitous results of its intricate briquette entre poteau and colombage styled architecture as he turned back from Toulouse and again on Royal, walking on a stone shell flooring covering buckshot soil, Oligocene deposits, the fossil bones of the Zeuglodon.

They were but alleyways to him, caverns infiltrated with people, faces, and bodies... some beautiful and desirable, others grotesque and repulsive, and amid them somewhere his expected quarry.

And though he failed to notice or appreciate the beauty of the old crumbling walls, stained with mold and mildew, copper gutters, oil jars foamed over with snake fern and palmettos hanging above cedar walls, flame vines draped on iron-lace balconies, camphor trees heavy with fragrance, slave brick, broken mortar, half-opened wooden doors leading into courtyards... a poet's dream, an artist's paradise... he did see and was affected by the beer cans and crushed newspapers and

candy wrappers and sticky papers from goods sold on the streets, the fermented alleys heavy with the odors of beer, muck, damp wood, the blobs of street lamps like warning signals, heavy shadows looming, music blaring and jarring, pouring from its own kind of purgatory. He saw, too, the black night pressing down over the rooftops of the buildings, like a black canvas draped ominously, making the buildings seem to lean inward, as if they were going to topple into the streets—weighted with people, iron-laced balconies, potted plants lined along eaves, signs, gutters, banners, men and women laying out on terraces on army mattresses in order to beat the heat, couples hinging from latticed windows, nightwatchers going to and fro in old kitchen rockers, blinds drawn in front of fanned doorways, like something lurid and secretive was taking place within, drunks, men sitting on the sidewalk, Negro children in small black parades, a long woman with eyes starved for sex, men searching.

Doubling back to Royal, on St. Peter's street he noticed on a dingy wall scrolled in mint green chalk the words; "Who dreamed the midsummer nights dream?" and above it, in a shaky attempt at old English lettering: "A fairy... who else!"

And below that, smaller, less obvious, was the phrase: "Who's afraid of Shakespeare?"

At the corner of St. Peter and Royal he stopped at a wheeled cart flushed by a fat, greasy Dago and bought a hotdog. It was in a little cardboard basket, and dripped onions and mustard as he tried to eat while he walked. In disgust, he tossed it into the gutter littered with identical baskets and waxed paper, paused briefly, lit a cigarette, puffed contentedly and continued his pilgrimage. People moving upstream against him, swept him into the street, but in a moment he was back again on the banquette... sidewalk... assuming his devil-may-care pose. Girls in mini-skirts eyed him wantonly, and men, men both young and old, stopped to let him pass, googled him, fisheyed, long after he had passed. He was being sought! And at the pleasant realization he began to sing to himself his old favorite tune, "It's a strange... strange... world we live in... Mister Jack!"

On the corner of Royal and Orleans, where the immense darkness bit at every visible thing, consuming the streets, the angled walls, an old Negro woman stepped out of the stygian depths. A red tighon (headband) concealed her bony skull, and her long slim arms, like straws dipped in chocolate, made wild gestures, and were strung with beaded bracelets, chains of rosary silver, Mexican jade. Here, as both saw each other simultaneously, they halted at the filthy curb, eye met eye, and for an instant Pepper felt hypnotized.

She tapped him on the chest with a bony finger, her

paralyzing gaze never faltering from his, and mumbled something he could not understand.

"Sorti de la cuisse de Jupiter... a piece from the thigh of Jupiter."

"Shove off, you old bag!" he said gruffly, stepped from the curb into the street. Her white eyes bugged hell out of him! He felt his hair stand on end. He hurried down across the street, whistling as he went.

"Evil! Evil!" she cried raspingly after him, her throaty voice but an echo. "Don't pass the cemetery unless you hold the hand of a child! Press your clothes with cedar! Mix ashes in your drink! Don't walk in the shadow of a camphor tree!"

"Old bitch!" he grunted to himself, his mood stabbed momentarily, as her dying voice down the dark street cried hauntingly, "Evil! Evil!"

To escape her he stepped into a lounge. It was on the corner, boasting with doors flung to the extreme, like the mouth of a cave. It was empty except for two men, middle-aged, who occupied the center area of the bar. A woman in black, high-piled hair shot with daisies asked him what he wanted to drink. Her heavily painted eyes went over him with a single glance.

"Make it a Rum'n Cola," he told her. He sat down at the bar, turned once deliberately and eyed the two men. They were in dark suits, looking like detectives, he concluded with a slight tremor, and he jerked his head back instantly when one of them turned in his direction. He mumbled something to the other.

The Italian-looking woman brought his drink and he sat quietly for a moment, stirring it before tasting it. He took a sip, swiveled a half turn on the stool and faced the streets. The jukebox was playing softly, Gene Pitney's Town without pity, and he listened to it halfheartedly, thinking how much it fit this city. Strangers! Cold... aloof strangers!

"Otis, you are wrong, you little chinchy bastard!" he cried beneath his breath, as he scrutinized the crowds fleeing past the widely flung doors. "Wrong about fruits being as thick as flies at a cowpile." He shrugged. "Maybe this ain't their night!"

He craned his neck, as the memory of the old Negro woman came back to him. Hoped like hell she didn't resort to following him, "That's all I need tonight... some lousy bitch fouling up my pitch! Wonder where that... that Gill St. Julien hangs out?"

He gulped down his drink, slid off the stool, gave the tall woman a rakish glance and made it back into the streets. Halfway down the block, he noticed a crowd milling outside one of the lounges. With a curiosity bent on the marauder's instinct, he saw the human signs, the stance, the gaudy attire, the vampish features on the young men, the college-boy costumes on the still

younger ones, the facades, the sudden erupting of expressions as he neared the crowds, the starving eyes, the obvious gestures, the ratty ones... obviously the punks and hustlers out to score... LIKE HIM... the frosty glances, the fury in eyes gored on the agony of desire.

Glancing above their gyrating heads he noticed the sign, a small insignificant poster with the words in black Roman scroll spelling out: LAFITTE'S IN EXILE.

"This is it, Pepper baby!" he mumbled to himself, smothering a grin. With a glance inventoried his person. Satisfied, he made his way through the mob, as they automatically made a wide breach for him to pass. Every eye locked on his face, his white, shiny hair, his languid, easy-going physique. And from the mob somewhere, everywhere, came the falsetto shrieks, "Christ! Look at the crowning glory!" "Shit! Who's looking at that? Get a load of that basket!" "It's HUSTLING night in the Quarter!"

A loud voice above the others, "Shake it, mother! Shake it!"

And another... singing. "How they gonna keep them down on the farm... once they've met gay Vieux Carrrrreeeee!"

And a deeper, more masculine tone, "Vamp... Vamp... Vamp the stud in marching... marching on to sexual blissss!"

Pepper, smothering a grin, keyed to exquisite pitch, with every nerve flexed and reflexing, his sailcloth jacket still flung recklessly over his right shoulder, went through the perfumed melee and to the entrance where, like so much colored flotsam and jetsam, it was jammed. A maze of forms, a stylized stratum of young men still appearing lovingly more youthful than they were: Lithe physiques in buttock blue jeans, campy experiments inspired by the remembrance of the bell-bottomed trousers of the Charleston era, angled-pocket slacks of every conceivable hue, Bostonian slippers with shiny buckles, sandals, sneakers, pastel McGregor blazers, Bravo jackets, coats in camel and pale green and gold and oyster and royal blue, the restless ones in white tennis socks, shorts, T-shirts, and the more elegant ones in windowpane checks, shoes of ivy gold and gored insteps, the more rugged, more masculine ones in trim Hammonton Park suite, contoured of pure virgin wool, fashion following the figure, orange and yellow shirts of Antron and Dacron, white shorts of silken weave, and the butch ones in striped town collars, softly flared to blend with soft contoured brows, Roman hairdos, Balboas, and the punks and the hustlers who trim every bar with something of the ridiculous, whether it be elegant, classical, or nondescript, decked out in tight jeans, shiny black boots, wide belts, and leather jackets.

"I see they've had roll call in this joint," Pepper mused,

as he pushed through the fragrance-haunted faces, being groped by numerous hands, perfumed torsos rubbing lovingly but trying to be polite in their purposeful pushing and swaying, all activated as if to a kind of hypnotic rhythm, enhanced and entranced by one body pressed wantonly against the other, some coming out while the horde pushed in.

The lounge called Lafitte's In Exile, like the one he had gone into on the opposite corner of Royal street, stood on the corner of the block, the entrance cutting off a portion of two walls. To the left rose a flaming gas torch from a mortar island around which was placed a number of chairs and low tables. The elongated bar, kidney-shaped, extended the full length of the right wall, with stools trimming its molded contours like hobnails in a leather saddle, and within the center, from the bar to the ceiling were stacked a mountain of decantered liquors. The darkened walls on all four sides of the lounge were littered with original oil paintings done by local artists, with price tags stuck to them, and illuminated by tiny lamps suspended from the low, yet darkly immense ceiling, each painting individually spotlighted and advertising its own brand of color and allure, beauty and profanity.

As Pepper at last gained entrance he was almost blinded by the torch roaring from its miniature island, an intense orange flame that hurled its reflections on the walls and paintings and onto the faces of the patrons who sat around it staring into nothingness, their eyes, caught up in the wild flames, looking like hot glass.

Easing into one the chairs flanking the torch, he ordered a Manhattan when one of the male waiters sashayed over to where he was sitting. A moment more, as if Pepper was an old established client, he was back with the drink, a deep, ready smile slashing his soft, blond face.

"You a model?" the waiter asked point-blank, lingering purposely as a number of faces turned in their direction.

"Shit no!" Pepper answered, then realized he had made a mistake. Play it cool, man! "Well, eh," he murmured, altering his mood. "I used to be, guess that's why I gave you such a smart ass answer."

"They fire you?"

"No. Quit. All that changing. Makes it a complete bore."

The waiter relaxed, leaned his body over the table, his weight propped up by one long, slinky arm.

"Know what you mean, uh... I didn't get your name?"

"Pepper."

"Pepper! Did a little modeling once myself. It's a tacky profession. You pose naked more than you do with clothes, if you know what I mean."

Pepper nodded like he did, which he didn't, and tried to smile. Several heads were now craned in their direction, as if taking in their every word, and glass eyes flashed.

"You're new here, aren't you?" the waiter asked, his voice now quickly softened to warmth, intimateness.

It was the all proverbial question asking in a lounge like this. No matter how crowded the bar, how many patrons filled the place nightly, a new face was automatically spotted, culled from the others, and given careful scrutiny.

At the questions, bluntly posed, Pepper gave a slight nod. He was not accustomed to catch-catch to questions and lingo, silenced of any glibness during his term of Angola, and he realized painfully that he had a lot of catching up to do. Once, he could have matched words and gimmicks with these fantastic exiles, but the hard life had knocked some of the playfulness out of him.

"Welcome to the club," the waiter cried, smiling, his voice purposely loud so that the other patrons could hear and make their bids. "Hope you come back." He fidgeted with his tray, reluctant, though several men on the opposite side of the torch were trying to gain his attention for another round of drinks. "If you need anything, Peppeeeeer, let me know... and I DO mean ANYTHING." Then he was off, but a slim silhouette in the darkness.

Pepper sipped on his drink, feeling very sumptuous and prideful, his eyes diverting from the fiery miniature hell which threatened to blind him. From the shadowy haze eyes peered in his direction, wanton, curious, arty, eyes both defenseless and defensive, eyes anonymously advertising and eyes menacing, blazing beneath the undercurrents of male desire.

For a moment of subterfuge, he pretended to be studying one of the paintings on the opposite wall. It was huge, almost life-size, and depicted a nude Negro male, a nudeness obviously rampant, and gross in detail and obvious intent. When he finally looked back at his drink a man was standing above him. He looked up, a little startled, and his eyes burned on him with the menacing futility of the roaring torch.

"Hope I'm not intruding," the man said apologetically, attempting a boyish smile. "Are you waiting for someone?"

Pepper answered that he wasn't, and tried to appear knowingly chick.

The man assumed an invitation in his answer and immediately pushed back a chair and sat down opposite him. He had a tall half-melted glass in one ringed hand, and he drained its contents in one deliberate gulp. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Pepper glanced at his own drink, saw that it was almost empty and nodded with a cool, "Yes."

"You're new in this bar, aren't you?" the man directly, following the waiter's initial assault.

"My first time to New Orleans," Pepper said, spreading his legs a little too invitingly. The man noticed, his gaze shifting.

"I hope you don't think me forward," the man went on. "But it's like this in this bar. One big happy family. When I... we see someone new we try to make them feel welcome."

"Do you own the place?" Pepper asked abruptly.

The man laughed. "Good grief no! I'm just a little cog in a big wheel, if you get what I mean. But I come here practically every night. It's my second home." He rolled his eyes curiously. "You can meet some nice tricks here. And believe me, I should know. I'm not complaining about my ration of come. I get my share and someone else's too." He shot Pepper a furious glance, "Guess you think me awful?"

"I don't think that," Pepper smoothed it over, though he found the man a little revolting. He had met his type before and managed somehow to tolerate them, even liking them a little, when they talked of other things than sex. As the man rattled on aimlessly, making wild use of his hands, he studied his features, his clothes, marking him down on his long mental list. Though around forty, he was good-looking in a way, his hair smoothly parted and combed over his brow, his eyes kind, his face a little too thin, which lent him a hungry, depraved look. He was elegantly dressed in a summer light weight worsted, a casket gray with a pale blue shirt, lavender tie and handkerchief. Cuff links the shape of silvery stars adorned his wrists, and his hands were those of the arts, the crafts, neatly trimmed of nails, emblazoned with richy rings.

"I'm Simon Shrader," the man introduced himself, after the slim, eye-balling waiter brought them a round of drinks, lingered, until the man gave him the eye. "What's yours?"

Pepper told him. Like true gentlemen they shook hands.

"There's a movie star by that name," the man questioned, tiny wrinkles forming on his brow, as if grossed in deep meditation.

"I wouldn't know," Pepper replied, leaning, cupping his frosty Manhattan with both hands. "Don't go to the movies much."

"Oh, I do," Simon replied, snuffing his cigarette butt into the terra cotta tray in acid disgust, to obviously advertise his misery. "Have to do something in this boring town. I see them all, even the silent ones out on Loyola. I should be a critic."

Pepper gave him a puzzled look, thought of Otis.

"But I heard this was a moving place," he said, reaching in his jacket for a cigarette and offering this Simon one. He refused, waved a hand merrily as if turning down a piece of

expensive jewelry. "I heard you could... eh... get anything here you wanted."

Simon let out a laugh. The jukebox in the corner was adrift with Petula Clark's *Color my World*, and for a moment they both listened.

"I suppose you can get anything you want here, Pepper," Simon said finally, staring down at his drink as if it were a crystal ball and he was dishing out hope and misery to the world. "That's just it. Everything is available, right at your fingertips, which bores hell outa me. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, but I like to pursue. I like to put up a chase while the other guy... girl... is putting up a run. This kind of life is boring when it's all around you, like in this place." He nodded his head in the direction of the crowded bar. "Everything's a circus. All these strip joints, night after night. Same old flabby tits, same old wrinkled behinds. Even in here, you never see a fresh new face, except maybe during Mardi-Gras festival week, but you never see them again, really. Everyone just vanishes when it is over, like the tourists. Nothing is lasting, permanent."

Pepper gave him a quizzical look.

"You want to find someone who will stick?"

"That's about it," Simon said, taking a smoke from a long silver case and lighting it from a lighter attached to the end. "I guess every gay wants someone he can depend on, count on for sex. Mostly companionship. That's how it is with me. Oh, I don't mean sex night after night, Pepper. God knows! I get tired of that just like a stud does. I want more than that. I want to get to know a nice-looking kid I can take out, buy gifts, show him a good time, find someone who will like me in return, who will admire me, look up to me, respect me."

Pepper glanced for a moment at his elegant clothes, his manner, his face emblazoned by the fiery torch, and he asked, "Don't people respect you?"

Simon shrugged.

"They do, I guess. Yes, people do respect me. But that number is reduced to those I work with, that kind of natural respect. But in the Quarter, in places like this." He shrugged again "Everything is so... so hollow... so empty, even sex. One night stands, gropings in the men's room, out in some dark alley, in the back seat of a parked car, nothing real, nothing lasting. You'd think every night is grab-bag night, everybody trying to make out."

What Simon was saying was only, to Pepper listening attentively, an echo of what he and Otis had discussed at Angola, a world teeming with dick-hungry men desperate to pay anything to swing on a young stud's rod, a sex-mad happening

without meaning nor intimacy, except during the act, without future longings and prolonged respect for each other... as sex partners... which other people... the straights... seemed to feel and share. Yet, this was the first time he had ever heard a gay reveal himself so thoroughly, laying bare his inner wants, his heartstrung desires, without the affection, the passion. Pepper had met and used numerous gays, and they all seemed to like and want the same thing, to get on their knees and mouth a rod, then vanish, leaving that hollowness of which now this Simon Shrader spoke.

Turning this over thoughtfully in his mind, he automatically conjured up the face of Sharkey Rider, his sexual hungers, the giver of pain, and he had thought that all boy-hungry men were like him, taking ruthlessly without giving, and he said as much to this Simon, this stranger eaten up with the fantastic flame of the torch.

"I thought all gays were alike, that all they want is sex, to get it as quick as possible, have their kicks, then run like hell."

Simon laughed out loud at that. Pepper, not just his good looks, his small petite build, delighted him, and there was proof of this in his glittering eyes each time he glanced in Pepper's direction.

"You slay me," Simon remarked puffing on his cigarette until his head was enshrouded in a halo of blue smoke. "Positively slay me. That's what all young studs think, hustlers... if you'll pardon the expression. They never consider a gay's feelings, or if he has any feelings. That's what makes this lavender world so unbearable! So much is canceled out, so much taken for granted. And that is why the straights are so hard on us, Pepper, they never give us credit for being men, men with hopes and ambitions and fulfillments of our own. A gay can think just as much of some young stud as any man can love a woman, maybe better, maybe much more, who is to say."

Pepper shot him a hard look, recalling the brutality of his life at Angola, the suffering he had endured under Sharkey's bestiality. Revenge swept him up in a small fury, and he almost lost his cool.

"I don't believe that," he said. "You're just trying to cover up. I've met a lot of gays and they're all just alike. Promising something, anything, just to get at a rod. They don't give a flip if the boy later starves or not, or has any feelings or not, or if he could grow to care or not. That's why they're always hanging out around toilets and bus stations and public places, so they can get their kicks in a hurry and skip out without having to pay more. All they want to know about a stud is how well he's hung, and that's all. Once they've found that

out, they could care less about the stud's personal life.

Simon's eyes glinted, as he ordered two more drinks, then scanned the bar once, raking everything in with one satisfied glance, then back to Pepper. "You're referring to one special breed of gay," he said, pointing a finger accusingly, almost defensively, "You're talking about those raunchy men who hang out on street corners and in men's rooms and in public parks. I loathe those forward bitches, Pepper, perhaps more than you do. Is that the only type gay you've made contact with, or is this a fair question?"

"I guess so," Pepper answered sheepishly, bowing his head over his fresh Manhattan, his memory swiftly heralding to mind men who had taken him sexually while in one of those partitioned toilets in bus stations, through the "glory holes" in a clump of bushes in some park at night, down on the wharves, groping him in a movie house balcony, coming on strong with him in vacant warehouses down on St. Ann and Decatur, jacking him off in the darkness of some offbeat lounge, then handing him a buck, maybe a five, ten if he was lucky. He thought too of Sharkey taking him, using his body in a quick orgy of self gratification, then discarding him coldly, remorseful, without further feeling or compassion, divulging in the sex act only, as if he had been but a desirable body, without heart, mind, conscience. He thought all men were like that, especially those men who lurked for young good-looking boys and, looking across the table at Simon Shrader he felt that he was seeing a phenomenon in this loathsome lavender world.

"You mean you know so," Simon added truthfully for him. "Not to criticize you, Pepper. You can't help it, no more than a million others who rush to this town looking for an impossible dream. Could you answer me one question, not that I'm trying to get nosey, or trying to dig up dirty linen, but since we're on this subject..."

"Sure," Pepper said, with a shrug of his shoulders. He had become used to being questioned, since his brush with the police and his "vacation" in Angola.

"Have you ever known a gay... a gay who works, who has a lively income, who is respectable, not one of those raunchy bitches who loiter around toilets... have you ever known such a man?"

"No, I haven't," Pepper answered without delay. "I just let a guy do it to me, then he pays me and blows."

Simon let out a faint smile, showing ready dimples.

"A hustler then?"

Pepper nodded in full confession.

"I guess you hate me now," he said, feeling a little crestfallen. He was beginning to like this elegant man, and in

liking him, admiring him, forgot momentarily that he was queer, that he may be like Sharkey, ruthless and merciless, or like the mangy ones who had groped him in the toilets, taking shameful advantage of his youth. "Guess you have an opinion of me?"

"I don't blame a kid for hustling," Simon answered readily, putting Pepper at ease. "If you can sell it then sell it. Every man out for himself. But you can sell it in a different way."

"How?" Pepper was quick to ask, all eyes, all ears.

"Find you a man who had lots to offer, a man who is respectable. Get to know him. Be good to him, without taking advantage of him. And in turn he will be good to you, and he will in time give you far more than you will ever earn hanging around toilets waiting to score. Honest, Pepper, I'm telling you the truth. You're a fine-looking boy, and you can go far in this world, if you'll play your cards right."

For a tense moment Pepper sat fumbling with his empty glass, daring to ask Simon the all important question, yet fearful of a rebuff, fearful of damaging his own self-pride. Finally, he blurted it out, never wasting words, "Are you that kind of man, Mr. Simon? Would you be good to me, if I'm good to you?"

There was silence for a moment. Above the hum of human voices rose the passionate voice of John Davidson on the jukebox singing *Somewhere My Love*. Simon took a sip of his drink, then looked at Pepper; a long trapped look.

"I would like to know you, Pepper, honest," he replied, after he had taken a puff from his cigarette. "Maybe this is the night, the one that has led up to all these years." His eyes on Pepper's were then futile, defensive, yet flaming with hope and desire. "I'm willing to give it a chance... if you are."

"I'm willing," Pepper said, as a tingly bit of his revenge took hold of his cunning. "When do we begin?"

"Right now," Simon said, sitting down his empty glass.

They got up from the table, as ooh's and sighs floated from the opposite extremity of the torch. A parade of bright hot eyes followed them as they made their way through the milling crowd, Simon, in a mannerly fashion not lost on a single pair of eyes in the place, allowed Pepper to walk in front of him, as a man might do his female date for the evening.

On the way to Simon's parked car, Pepper kept hoping: Maybe this man knew Gill St. Julien. And with this possibility, he felt somehow that he was gaining a little with his vendetta against all homosexual men, not losing, as he had so miserably lost with that mangy Anson Lemarque... the shit and piss man... that his monetary tryst with Simon was but the first stepping stone, really, toward his final, despotic goal.

In ten minutes Simon steered his flashy convertible into a

little courtyard camouflaged in wisteria and shrouds of weaving moss.

Simon Shrader lived on the corner of Dumaine and Royal, in the very heart of the Vieux Carre. The house was ancient to Pepper, or so it seemed to him, as they crossed the flagstone courtyard alcovod with waving banana leaves and up a flight of wrought-iron stairs. But once inside and the lights were turned on, lights dimmed beautifully with silken shades the hue of whiskey glass, he seemed to cross time and into the ultra modern. White leather gleamed above the soft carpets of royal blue. Plastic flowers dominated Greek urns. And an elaborate T.V. console and hi-fi brought the place quickly up to date. Spanish arches were broken pleasantly with plastic drapes, the clean hue of falling water, and fantastically sculptured ashtrays, the largest Pepper had ever seen, made the place resemble something out of a colored science fiction movie.

"You live in a mansion," Pepper remarked, a little awed by such splendor, and his mind quickly compared this with the drabness of Angola.

"Thanks," said Simon, fixing them a drink at a bar that looked as if it were molded from solid ivory. "I call it my white elephant, for I'm always going out on a payday and buying something utterly useless to put in it. It's a fetish, I guess. I promised myself long ago, decades really, that each payday I would buy my little ivory tower a gift."

"It won't be long before you'll run out of room," said Pepper, noticing how crowded it was, statues and vases and paintings and do dads like you see in china shops.

Simon shrugged, then sipped his drink.

"It keeps me from going insane. You got to keep up pretenses of sanity, even if you turn into a raving lunatic... and believe me," he waved a hand like a wand, "you can go out of your nellie mind in the Quarter... nothing but Yankee tourists, and you couldn't trick one if you did a strip at high noon. Let me inform you, baby, all those damn tourists are interested in is history... the St. Louis cathedral, the Pontalbas, the Cabildo, Napoleon, Napoleon, Napoleon. The way Yankees carry on you'd think that little runt had lived here."

Pepper looked dumfounded.

"But... but I thought he had."

"Dear me no, honey. He never got any closer to Louisiana than the d'Oleron. He could have cared less about coming here... always did think Louisiana was a mosquito infested swamp." He laughed bitterly. "He didn't know this was a queer's paradise."

Pepper sipped his drink and peered at him over the rim of his glass. Ironically he muttered:

"There's queers everywhere. I've never been to a town in my

life that wasn't swarming with them."

"Now don't put us down so," Simon shrugged, rattling the ice in his drink, "Our army is growing, that is true. But... BUT... we do have our rights, just like the nigg... the darkies. We'll be wearing a uniform and carrying our own banner and marching on Washington yet, just you wait and see." He shook a finger at Pepper.

"Shit!"

Simon laughed.

"You don't think much of gays... do you?"

Pepper sat down on the edge of the white feather divan, and leaned back against a mountain of brightly colored pillows.

"They're okay... in a pinch. But I had rather have a woman. It's fucking I like."

As if by magic, Simon's facial expression altered from that of the masculine to the feminine. He slithered down close to Pepper.

"Darleeeen! We'll have to do somethiing about that."

Pepper changed the subject. Queer talk was disgusting. He didn't mind too much a gay sucking on his prick, or even making light love to him, that is, if the gay guy was young like him and not some old motherfucker. He was puzzled. At the club downtown this guy seemed masculine enough. Now he was coming on like a faggot, a24, escapade, and the whole south for that matter. Course, he had scored with...

"About this, er, Napoleon fellow?"

"Let's don t discuss him," Simon interrupted. "Or I'll be mistaking you for one of them lousy tourists."

"What we gonna talk about then?"

"I'll tell you what," Simon suggested, laying a pointed finger on Pepper's thick thigh. "You take off your glad rags, see, and while you're doing that I'll just hip-sway it into the bedroom and slip into something comfy..."

"Okay," Pepper said, realizing from experience that the crucial moment had arrived. He sat down his empty glass and got up. Simon crossed the carpet, paused and turned at the bedroom door.

"Why... who knows, honey, I might surprise you."

I'll bet! thought Pepper, as he slipped out of his things and sat back down naked. The soft lights fell on his nakedness in soft golden hues and set him off to perfection against the white leather. He had always admired his body, considered himself built far above the average guy, and he had known since he had reached fifteen that he appealed to both men and women. A sex natural, one guy had told him. He lit a cigarette and sat musing to himself, his head bowed, his gaze going over his crotch where his beautiful prick and balls in their nest of

thick golden wool waited for... what? He hoped this Simon Shrader did not turn out to be one of them shit and piss men, like that hairy bastard Anson Lemarque. He couldn't, and wouldn't, take that kind of crap again. He had loathed New Orleans after that nasty escapade, and the whole south for that matter. 'Course, he had scored with a number of queers that weren't at all half-bad. In fact, some of them had been both nice sexually and generously. Like that Ptolemy De Armas, for instance, who had driven him out to Lake Pontchartrain for an afternoon swim, had bought him a savory meal at Madame John's Legacy, had handed him a ten spot and never tried to put his hands on him once, or that richy fruit Whitney Leboeuf who only wanted to tongue him in the crack of his ass (they had done that in the men's room at the Saenger moviehouse with him standing up, having but to drop his drawers for a few minutes), he had gotten a nice clean twenty for that, or even this Porter Kepler, he recalled, who only wanted to suck his toes then set him up in the Warwick hotel.

'Course, there had been some rotten weirdos too: An old man who wanted Pepper to hold him down in a tub of boiling hot water while he jacked himself off, a young Negro who wanted to be beaten with a whip, an old Dago who poured a plate of raw oysters around Pepper's crotch then sucked them up, this guy who put a rubber on Pepper's prick before giving him a blow job, a woman... the only woman cocksucker he had ever encountered, who hung around in front of the men's toilet at the Greyhound bus station trying to score young kids as they came out... and this body builder who gave tongue baths, and an old fat nanny who begged for it in the behind.

Weirdoes all! And there had been some, naturally, that Pepper would not let touch him no matter how tempting their offers were in greenbacks. They had to look right to him, that certain something, before he would drop his pants or shoot his load.

So he sat in the beautiful light recalling some of the good and bad ones who had become his sex-partners since his arrival in New Orleans, and wondered how this Simon Shrader was going to turn out.

As he pondered, his gaze rambled, picking out this and that about the lush apartment. His eyes came to rest on an enormous painting on the foyer wall which fascinated him to no end. It was rendered in bright colors, like a grade B technicolor movie, and in vivid and painstaking detail. The subject was of a nude man and woman. The man was lying back on an enormous stone, asleep apparently, and the girl was posed above him on another, trying to awaken him by tickling him under the chin with a leaf. The painting was titled appropriately *The Yellow Leaf*. The man

was extremely well-built, with veins and muscles and body hair showing, and Pepper compared the model to his own physique. One would have thought he had posed for the painting, for their physical appearances were identical.

Some cat! Pepper praised, as he studied the model then his own body there in the golden shrouds of light.

He glanced at the bedroom door. What the fuck! When was this Simon going to come out? What was he doing in there... taking a douche?

Then automatically, as if he was sitting in at the beginning of a movie production, ponderous music began to come as if from every room. He recognized it instantly. It was the background score from *The Captain from Castille*. And no sooner had it gotten underway then the bedroom door opened and out stepped... who?

Goddamned, it wasn't Simon... but a woman!

She was tall and blonde, slinky in a white silk wrap with white feathers, looking like Jean Harlow, even to the white spiked-heeled pumps.

"What the hell?" he muttered, rising to his feet. He had gotten half a hard-on, sitting there with his prick resting between the warmth of his naked thighs, and it jutted out in front of him like the rigging of a ship, all heavily veined and strutted in the complementary light.

"I said I may surprise you," the woman said, but in the unmistakable masculine voice of Simon Shrader. "How do I look, Pepper darling?"

The son of a bitch was in drag!

Embarrassed, thinking the woman a real woman, and him standing naked with a bone on, he was taken back for a moment, then angry.

"What did you want to go and put on all that shit for?" he asked, point blank. A woman was a woman, a man a man, and he saw no justification in mixing them up.

"Well," Simon said, his hands resting on his hips, as he floated across the room to where Pepper stood. "You said earlier you would rather fuck a woman than a man... so I thought I would give you a whole sex."

"Shit!"

Simon's painted eyes lost their luster.

"I'm only trying to please," he said, trying to be feminine and coy. "If you don't please them the first time, honey, they never come back. And I doooo want to please you... to the utmost." At that, his Cleopatra gaze slid down to Pepper's naked crotch. Simon flushed through his make-up. "God almighty damn!" he stammered. "How do they grow them so big these days? Why, when I was a teen aged kid there were no studs around hung like

this. What is it? All these vitamins, or specials put out on a budget basic for the astronauts?"

Pepper was amused at this.

"It's just plain he-male stuff," he said, boastful.

Simon's eyes widened.

"You don't have to tell me that, honey. You're just like those football Saints out at Tulane. Damn if I don't believe they feed them fodder or something, just like prize bulls." His voice trembled now and, reaching down, he took Pepper's prick in his long painted finders and gave it a little, warm squeeze. He allowed his hands to wander, cuddling his balls and along his inner thighs where they joined his crotch.

Pepper became embarrassed. This Simon looked so much like a real woman, and a complete stranger at that, that it made him feel peculiar to have her (him!) taking liberties with his meat. But Simon's hand had a certain touch that thrilled and he responded to the sex play.

They both had become hypnotized by now, and just stood there facing each other while Simon worked Pepper's prick up and down, then felt the head of it, like taking hold of a polished door knob, then skinned it back and forth, his long heavily-ringed fingers sinking into Pepper's pubic hair.

In a guttural, lost voice Simon said, "You know, I bet you would look divine in army khaki. Khaki just does something for a man, especially if he is dark like you with lots of crisp body hair." His wandering hands moved slower now, like snakes on unfamiliar ground. "Saw a kid once out by the Liberty monument. He was blond like you, baby, all dark and satiny. He was wearing the shortest shorts the law will allow and an old ragged army shirt with the tail out. It was long-sleeved and buttoned up to his chin, but he was barefoot and all you could see was those suntanned legs and all the curly hair on them. That little doll put Marilyn Monroe to shame. I got all hot and bothered just looking at him... like a lot of the other shitty queens... but I don't think he knew what we were staring at. Poor darling! Not right then, anyway. Like a bitch I followed him. It was a hot day and my make-up was running and we ended up way out at the Metairie cemetery.

"What happened?" Pepper asked, but not interested in the little fucker. Out of control of his facilities, he slid up and onto Simon's body and pinned him against the pillows. He began to hunch.

"Well, when I couldn't make it another step... honey, I was in drag and at high noon... I asked him for a light. We sat on the stone fence for a moment, under the trees, and like a bold ass I made my play. The little punk knew all along I was a man, pretending sweet innocence... oh, I hate little deceiving punks!"

Though Simon kept on talking, mostly in grunts and sighs, he reached round beneath his right thigh, caught hold of Pepper's prick and guided it into his rectum, woman fashion. Pepper gave several forward thrusts until it was in to the hilt. Simon wrapped his arms and legs around Pepper, and their bodies moved in a continuous, beautiful unison.

"Did... you make that kid?" Pepper asked, rather grunted. He had rumped queers before but always from the rear, either them laying flat on their belly or standing and bending over. This was as real as putting it to a woman, and he caught himself feeling for her breasts.

"Honey," Simon answered, screwing up his painted lips when Pepper's forward lunges sent wild sheets of flame up his spine. "Honey... he laid me on my Nellie ass, right there... in front of all them nice dead people. My eye was sexy-purple for a month. Said he... knew... Ouch! Pepper! Don't play so roooooough, honey! Said I was a lousy fruit, that he knowed all along. Then, know what he did... the cute little son of a bitch walked off with a prissy black queen!" Simon pulled Pepper tighter against him. "I adore the way... you fuck... honey. Makes me feel... complete."

"It does," Pepper grunted, too busy now to talk. It had never felt so good, the hot meat wrapping his prick with a sucking tightness that sent thrilling thunderbolts up his rump and into and through his every vein. He could hear his prick going in and out of Simon's body, little sloshing noises which made him feel very masculine and savage, and he tried to outdo himself. He made powerful lunges, the cheeks of his rump tightening and slackening with each movement. With the strength in his own thighs he pressed Simon's further apart, so his prick would go as far as it would go and, gripping Simon firmly by the shoulders, he worked his pelvis like the ringing of a bell, back and forth, up and down, taking full advantage of the tight crevice in which his prick slipped in and out.

Simon let out contented sighs, followed by little cries of agony when Pepper became too rough. And both men clung to one another as if they were falling through the darkness, one giving, the other taking. In the faint hues of the lamps they looked like man and woman, and it was with this likeness, Simon looking so much like a girl, that Pepper gave his all, without restraint, and now without embarrassment.

The continuous movements of his body became wild and frenzied. Each downward thrust of his groin became more fiercely powerful, more ruthless. Each jerk of his hips became more rigid and exact. The constant rise and fall of his rump became almost like a machine drilling into the earth. His whole body, galvanized and set to the tune of sex, grated in a kind of brutal music, ponderous, animal. Something was happening to a

his body. There was a gendering through his loins, a feeling so splendid, a feeling so overwhelming he could but obey the challenge of his male intent. He would have to go on and on, pumping and struggling with this ecstatic rapture, until his body found the relief one body must find and must always have in another's. Momentarily, Pepper let it slip from his mind that Simon was a man. His every emotion, his every nerve, his every vein and muscle felt to the ultimate the whole purpose of his sex, and lent him a kind of wile ferocity tamed only when he spermed.

And he did that almost with the shuddering impact of an explosion.

His rump went rigid, his thighs became like stones, and every part of him tried to bury itself up in Simon's warm flesh. With the thrill of feeling the climax of life, with every nerve electrifyingly alive, he could feel his sperm gush through his prick and far up into Simon's rectum. Each drop went like hard, hot marbles, and his senses were in time tuned and keyed to this movement. And in his mind's eye he actually saw the sperm make its wild way through his prick, for to him that was the real glory in coming. Like when he jacked off, he loved to look at his prick, admire it and, most especially, when he saw the white sperm leap from the head and make an arch into the air. No moment could take the place of this.

When he was finished, he lay buy a second relaxed. His whole body felt weak, but sublime, like when he was exhausted from hard work, but in that same instant he bounced back to logic. Simon was a man, and he realized this with a jerk of his behind. His prick popped out of Simon's rectum, and he was on his feet in a flash. He did not want to look at Simon laying there in the mountain of pillows trying to be a woman. They were strangers now, their bodies alien to each other. This was always his reaction after sex. It was this attitude that made of him a poor lover... with both men and women. Before and during the sexual act their bodies became the sacrifice for his carnal pleasures. But after he had shot his sperm they were made of cold, untouchable wax.

Simon lay weakly on the divan, not knowing what to do exactly. He too was physically exhausted (and in his case... taking the impossible role... mentally exhausted as well).

"Did... you enjoy it, honey?" he asked a little sheepishly.

"It was okay," Pepper answered, recoiling every emotion. Awkwardly, he stole a glance at Simon. His thighs were still spread limply, glowing white in the light and repulsive with hair. On the white satin gown he wore was a blood-brown stain. Pepper quickly jerked his gaze away.

"I'd like to take a shower," he said, almost rudely.

Simon lifted himself up from the divan as if he was made of stone and brought out some clean towels and body lotions.

"You're the king," he said musedly, smiling a tragic shadow of a smile. "My lover... my husband," he added daringly.

Pepper gave him a watchful eye.

"It's gonna cost you. I don't come cheap."

"I rather expected that," Simon said, masculine again. Pepper had shattered the illusion. "Now I know what to do with my millions."

Pepper popped Simon on the behind playfully with the towel and went into the shower. Fearful of what he might see, he refused to look at his prick until he had thoroughly bathed.

3

Pepper sat with Simon Shrader in a little sun-splashed courtyard directly off Royal. It faced Dumaine, and the many strollers could have been observed were not the enormous wood paneled floors closed, the iron lock snapped in place. Few people were ever permitted within this enclosure, except by invitation, and Simon had managed somehow to secure a pass for him and Pepper through one of the performers of the musicians from the Iberian peninsula.

The courtyard was privately owned and used by Spanish dancing troupe as a secluded place to rehearse their dance and musical numbers later to be performed at the famous Flamenco Club on Bourbon street.

And it was for this exact reason that Pepper Lorrie and Simon Shrader were occupying one of rustic tables and chairs, along with a small parade of other guests present by invitation... the Flamenco Club itself!

Pepper had managed to wrest from Simon, during one of their more intimate moments, a few important things about Gill St. Julien, and one of his few bits of information was that Gill had a weakness for Spanish dancing, and frequented the Flamenco Club almost nightly.

It was on the hot afternoon of June 2, 1967. Pepper, dressed in a blue bengal-striped shirt, dove gray wrangler jeans and a wide canary yellow belt, sat leaning back in the wrought-iron chair, sipping a cold Daiquiri as his black beady eyes watched every movement made by Morca, a male Spanish import who, in skin tight black, made clattering noises on the flagstones with his shiny black high heeled boots. A low wind in from the Gulf Coast and the river whirled up little tornados of dust, and dust boiled around Morca's feet and the enormous rustling skirts of La Conte, his female dancing partner. Beneath a camphor tree a Spanish guitarist sat on a wooden stool, making soulful notes, notes, each distinct and each separated in tone value, conjured, lured, made one dream.

Simon, in a Mexican inspired striped jacket of red and white, red slacks and red turtle necked sweater, sat beside him, though not attentive to the dance as was Pepper, rather shifting his eyes from flaming dancers then to Pepper's radiant suntanned face caught in pensive profile.

Both men were silently engrossed, yet not in the same thing.

"Just why are you so determined to meet this Gill St. Julien?" Simon found courage to ask, when the dancers had softened their dance somewhat by the ebbing tempo of their hard

leather heels on the dusty stones.

"Like I told you a thousand times," Pepper answered in obvious irritation, "I have a note to give him from a friend of mine."

"Who is this friend?" Simon probed further.

"His name is... it is Otis Pigott," Pepper answered with a soft, almost toneless voice, using Otis's name when no other made itself visible in the top of his cunning mind.

"He's from New Orleans?"

"Hammond," Pepper lied. "A relative or something like that."

"I doubt if Gill will see you," Simon advised, defending, with Gill's snobbishness, Pepper's exposure to other gays. "He has the reputation of being very discreet. An important man here in New Orleans you know. He does have to be careful."

"He'll see me," Pepper assured him, with a cock-sure attitude, brushing the matter aside with a casual spoken, but overly used phrase. The hot sun was breaking him out in a sweat, and he noticed the sweat beading on the faces of the dancers, faces that looked tortured so wrung were their emotions by the fiery music and the wild dance itself, faces agonized and frozen in some kind of rhythmic pain he could not comprehend. They were living the dance, the music, breathing it, engrossed in it, submerged wholly within the circle of fire, but he saw only the outward signals they conveyed, heard the haunting rhythm and did not feel the maddening currents which raced with their souls. Like all things of the arts he observed, he saw only the sensuous aspect of the dance, their beautiful bodies, and not the skill, the hard work, the endurance beneath.

"Why does Gill St. Julien get his kicks over these kooky dancers?" he asked of Simon, not taking his frozen gaze from their writhing forms.

"He likes hard, well-built men," Simon replied, coughing. He placed a hand over his mouth, not primarily to shield his cough but, instinctively, to smother his jealous wrath over Pepper's gnawing interest over a man he had never seen.

"That cat sure is hung!" Pepper remarked, as he studied the tight, shiny-black attire of the dancer.

"It's the costume," said Simon, diverting his gaze. "Even I would look good dressed like THAT!"

Pepper turned to him and smiled one of his captivating smiles.

"You'd look good in a paper bag, baby!"

This brought a conjecture of emotions from Simon, who took the expression literally, and he fairly outdid himself twitching and pivoting and giving Pepper the fisheye.

"That's why I'm so good to you," he whispered lovingly,

completely ignoring the other guests, reaching over to preen the material of Pepper's new shirt. "Why I love to buy you beautiful things. You appreciate me, don't you... darllling!"

Pepper said with a shrug, "Yeah, I appreciate you. I appreciate everything."

"I'm glad we got together," Simon said, wanting to reminiscence, moodful and melancholy under the spell of the hauntingly beautiful guitar music and the fiery dancers. "I hope we never break up. I want you always, Pepper baby, always. I want us to live together for the rest of our lives. You're so beautiful. You have the most beautifully shaped dick I've ever sucked, honest, baby, I mean this. I never get enough. My God! Just to think about it makes my flesh crawl and I get an erection. Such a beautiful dick!"

"You've already told me that," Pepper said in acid disgust, craning his head to see if anyone else had heard, as Simon, drawn up in his spurts of emotion, became louder and louder of tone.

"Got carried away, baby," Simon made excuses, carefully sliding his hand down to caress Pepper's thigh.

He was still carried away as later that night they sat at an elegant table in the Flamenco Club watching the dancers repeat what they had seen them do earlier that evening. He kept placing his arm on the back of Pepper's chair, kept making little pretty remarks, kept bringing up their "love".

Pepper, tolerating this charade of mock compassion, but inwardly, and with intense loathing, neither paid much attention to Simon or the dancers. His black eyes roved, picked out each male face in the vast audience, hopeful of seeing and possibly recognizing, through Simon's and Otis's description, the handsome face of Gill St. Julien.

"He's not here," Simon said, and with a cool tone to his voice, when he caught on to Pepper's deception, his utter lack of attention, his bland reproof of everything he had said to him that evening, his little compulsive love notes.

"Are you sure?" Pepper came back tartly, his patience wearing thin. Everything was beginning to appear hopeless, his revenge, his frantic pursuit to New Orleans to carry out the role he and Otis had so desperately and minutely planned. He could have carried out the same pattern of revenge on Simon Shrader, the man who sat next to him, a man he had already sexually and heartedly snared, one more agate in his determined quarry, but somehow and for reasons he could not name, the plan he and Otis had planned, hopeful of whipping into stark reality, was etched on his brain. It was now as if it was something he had to do, some secretive rendezvous he must keep with destiny, some magic spell which he could not break.

Simon looked at him, patted him affectionately on the arm. He did this without caution, as though Pepper was a girl not a boy. Men like him, frequenting gay bars, hemmed into the gay life, failed always in moments of affection to become wary of straights, the straight world. Men, too, of his age, had long since altered their opinions concerning their own homosexuality. When younger, they had been ashamed of their "condition". Older, they had grown to accept it as a thing basically normal, and out of some defensive attitude of their own malady, thrust their conditions on others, forcing, or attempting to force, their world on the world of the straights.

"I am sure," he said, gazing into Pepper's hard black eyes with a love he failed to notice in Pepper's. "But I see a friend of his. If you can keep you virginity for a few moments I'll go over and inquire. His name is Jester Ferrara. He's an artist from Houma. He may know something."

"Sure, go ahead and ask him," Pepper said. And with a more loving note, considering how good Simon had been to him, he added, "I'll keep myself on ice... just for you, babe."

That was all that was needed. In a moment Simon was back at their table.

"Well," Pepper stammered impatiently.

"Gill's in New York," Simon replied.

"When is he coming back?" Pepper asked, almost demanded, sitting on the edge of his chair. Beads of sweat popped out on his brow.

"This week end," said Simon, casually puffing on his cigarette, secure in Gill's momentary absence.

Noticing that Pepper was crestfallen, naturally disappointed, in order to cheer him up, Simon later took to the La Fogata restaurant on Rampart street.

The place was decorated in traditional bullfight posters and sombreros. A genuine Mexican guitar hung against a magenta rug, and the jukebox was framed by a large straw mat patterned on an Aztec warrior's headdress. Music by Tito Guizar filled the vast, semi-dark room, along with the Padilla sisters, Mariachi Mexico.

While Pepper perused the menu, Senorita Olga, who owned the place, served an appetizer of tostadas with chili sauce. And while they later listened to the Tijuana Brass . . . Casino Roy ate, Wade in The Water, and others, they ate tacos, enchiladas, frijoles, and unique native dishes of chorizo, chicharron and menudo. For a night cap they went to Fernandez's wine cellar on Decatur street, then to Simon's apartment close to Jackson Square, where Simon came on stronger than Pepper had ever known him, much to his loathing, remembering as from some far off nightmare, blobs red, like blood, the hard, dark body of Sharkey

Rider, which toned his revenge and his fury with a greater, more intense and determined violence.

After that night, thought Pepper remained with Simon, accepted his sex money, his new clothes, his gifts of jewelry, he felt as he had felt with Sharkey in prison, that somehow he had been duped.

Desperate now to unfold his anarchic plan before his mind, to ponder it, bring it to vivid life, in the late afternoons around dusk, when the sun had dropped behind the rotten buildings in the Quarter, he took to walking up and down Rampart street, counting the minutes until Gill St. Julien returned from New York. Since Simon did not know the location of Gill's home, Pepper knew he would have to find it for himself, and he hoped by walking the inroads of this famous street, he, by chance, would bump into him sooner or later.

However he chanced to meet him, he above all else did not want to appear the hustler. Otis's tactful advice was still fresh on his memory, branding there, and he realized their first meeting would count, that he would have to make a good first impression. How he was to achieve this Pepper was not certain. He thought he would leave it up to chance. Sometimes this worked better than a stiff, formal greeting.

Just play it cool, Pepper boy, he kept reminding himself over and over, as he strolled the beaten paths tourists had invaded for centuries. Always careful about his clothes, that his platinum hair was in place, in case they met accidentally, he sometimes acted out the role of tourist, a camera dangling from a leather strap on his shoulder, binoculars, that sight seeing attitude in his manner and speech.

In his triumphant dusk walk, during those hot but golden evenings, evenings still and fragrant with the perfumes of jasmine and rose and camphor, going by shops and houses evening after evening, he began in time to know each place by heart: Morton's Antiques, Rogers Hardware, Puglia's Quality Foods with its thick aromas of sausages and cheese, stuffed artichokes, barbecue chicken, St. Mark's church, and all the elegant homes sitting high above pale-sun-splashed walls, rows of winding steps going up to front doors of glass and fanned-shaped overhangs, homes of gray tiled roofs, stucco, many of them lately whitewashed for the sake of tourist trade, many with shutters and latticed blinds toned by the weather to a mint green, apple pink, galleries trimmed in iron-lace, oil jars filled with fern and Spanish dagger, and verbena... all a little aloof, majestic against the pure limpidity of the evening sky, like grand ladies in enormous hoop-skirts sitting in idle splendor, fanning, whispering, listening to beautiful music.

And somewhere amid this long, endless row of homes lay Gill

St. Julien's sumptuous dwelling, the ambushade of his driven quarry.

Here, amid these delicate houses, that looked like filigree and lace, he would bring to bay his avenger. He would frantically but patiently scavenge him out of his lair, a young desirable marauder, if his plan worked, to end his revenge on one man as a given symbolic token of them all.

"He's rich," he remembered Otis saying repeatedly. "And a queer with money don't deserve to live!"

Evening upon evening! A dusk walk premeditated, foresworn, mapped, scheduled, locked crazily in his frantic mind, always neatly dressed, begging Simon for additional sportswear when the grandeur of the others had palled for him, keyed to the feverish pitch of a thief, a murderer, one in the throes of a superheated crime, ending his long journey in violence and revenge.

"I'll pay you back, Sharkey Rider!" he vowed daily as he prepared to dress and go out, as his fanatic occupation drew him into the Quarter and onto Rampart street. And, as he went, smelling of soap and water and cologne, he sang his old tune, "It's a strange... strange world we live in... Jack!"

On Friday, June the 16th, 1967 he came face to face with his quarry.

It was on Rampart street, beyond Congo Square. He was dressed in a dramatic Arnel and cotton blazer tattersall checked, a blue and black on a ground of white. His hip-huggers were off-beat eggshell white, and he was wearing white Corfan four-eyelet blucher golf shoes with kiltie tongues. He was also freshly shaven, every blond hair in place, and smelling strongly of Villa D'este. He was singing, never going further than the first line of his favorite song when his black, ever-watchful eyes spotted a bright, shiny sports car parked near the west curb. It was a Pontiac Grand Prix. A man, tall but youthfully muscular was bending over the hood, and when Pepper approached, still signing, he straightened up and smiled.

"Car trouble?" Pepper asked casually, never suspecting the man's identity, the role he would play in his life, on and on to its tragic ending, as if they were both puppets on an enormous stage, placed there as decoys in a drama, awaiting their cue should a late curtain rise.

"Shouldn't have car trouble," the man said, wiping his sweaty brow on the sleeve of his short knit shirt. "Just bought it brand new in New York last week."

A tourist, Pepper suspected, leaving the narrow sidewalk and going round to the side of the car. He peered over the hood. He knew a lot about cars. One of his joys. He studied the mechanism silently, studiously. "A loose sparkplug," he said, tightening it back. He then tried the others. They were all

tight, the cables connected to them in their proper place.

"Want me to see if it will start?" he asked the man, who quickly, obediently took the keys from his slacks pocket and handed them to him.

"Sure I do," the man said, with apology. "I'm afraid I'm a complete ninny when it comes to anything mechanical."

Pepper eased catlike into the plush leather seat, thrust the key into the slot and turned on the ignition. It started immediately, the motor like wind through wet silk. With the engine still running, he got out of the car and handed the man back his medallion, a medal pendant which was attached to the keys. But as he did so he noticed the initials... G. St. J. embossed into the shiny gold. His heart skipped a beat, and his hands trembled as the man took the pendant.

"It must have come loose," he said, looking squarely into the man's pale blue eyes, eyes that strangely looked like ice.

"Don't fret it," the man said, bending over with thanks. "It comes loose all the time. What do I owe for fixing my car?"

"Nothing," Pepper lamented, shaking his head. He had been paid enough. This was his lucky day. "It didn't take no doing."

The man stood there for a moment, the sun on handsome face, just looking down at him. Then, getting into the car, he said, "Thanks again. Maybe I'll see you sometime... buy you a drink."

Pepper smiled, nodded in acceptance.

"I'm sure we will, Mister," he mumbled beneath his breath as the man sent the sports car down the street with a roar.

With sudden relief sweeping over him, Pepper stood in the flagstoned street and looked up at the house directly in front of where the car had been parked. It was a mansion, laced with iron work and feted with enormous oil jars brimming over with delicate fern. Steps of red tile marched up to it in a wide breach, so wide six men could climb them abreast, and ended in a galleried esplanade and an enormous doorway shaped like a Spanish fan. Over the door, circled in delicate bronze, was the wording: THE HOUSE OF ST. JULIEN.

The end of his journey! So this was the house of Gill St. Julien, and that was Gill whose car he had fixed! Otis was right. Even though Gill was a queer, he was handsome, built like an athlete.

Victorious, Pepper went down the street singing, "It's a strange... strange world we live in... Jack!"

4

Gill St. Julien sat at his Napoleon III desk and went through his morning mail. It was June 23rd, 1967. It was a daily habit of his. He would instinctively always draw the white silk portieres from their oval French windows so that the light could shine in abundantly, and then fix a Planter's Punch before settling down to his stack of letters.

Sometimes he found reading his mail a complete bore, other times an inspirational joy. This morning, however, nothing in the stack appealed to him. An invitation to a party at Norman Lirette's, a dinner engagement from Jester Ferrara, an effeminate artist from Houma, a group with the Mayor on the "President", though this needed and adhered to for reputation's sake, a clipping from a sculptor friend of his in the Veieux Carre Courier, an invitation to a Pirates Alley art show, an invitation to the Junior Membership ball, a reminder from a friend of his concerning a tour of the Bayou Lafourche plantations, a night in old New Orleans dining at the La Boucherie, an invitation to view a miniature model depicting the shifting of the river, and to view a model of Jackson Square displaying the alignment of the new Interstate expressway through the Quarter, a move which had caused a great deal of controversy with the die-hards who had fought doggedly that the old French Market and Quarter remain intact, unmarred by modern interception.

Gill had a mixed emotion concerning modernizing the Quarter. He loved it, yet, he loathed it. An artist, a builder, a creator at heart, he loved the Quarter for its romantic appeal. But he also loved progress, loved to look at the towering spires of needle-sharp buildings, contours of glass and mortar and steel rigging, of bridges expanding city blocks, of white thoroughways slicing the emerald countryside.

It was from this mixed love that his home, though architecturally colombage in design and style, a bit of briquette-entre-poteau, was furnished with both the old and the ultra new, marble and leather and fruitwood interwoven with Queen Anne chairs, Sheraton beds, Chippendale lowboys, Palladian windows draped with the thickest of brocade, Duncan Phyfe additional, French chests, Duchesse dressing tables, radios, television sets in every room, books, records, figurines, Greek statues, warm throw pillows on cold white marble, musical instruments, paintings galore, and expensive decanters of wines and liquors.

Gill St. Julien would be forty-eight on August the twenty fourth, though he looked no older than thirty. His body was

still slim, was hard, sinewy, and only the slightest of graying showed on his temples, lending rather than taking, from his stylized features. He played golf and tennis regularly, went swimming almost daily in his private pool in the rear of the house, which could now be seen from his library windows, and lifted weights. Too, his clothes were of mod cut, as was the styling of his hair, which added to his youthful appearance, and caused many men, especially those among the homosexual society of New Orleans to both admire and envy him. He looked like a model in a Petrocelli clothes ad, or maybe a more striking Phoenix, sleek and cool in mohair or Dacron. At forty-seven he had learned and attained all the arts of elegance. The man about town, the perfect god all men seek but usually never find, that gilded godshed which rises beautifully above the common sea of communal failure. He did not look like, nor did he attain the mannerisms of a homosexual, and few of his business friends could or would have thought him such.

Gill had taken architecture at Tulane, with a degree in landscaping, and had attended four years art and sculpturing at the Chicago Institute. On his return he had worked as a commercial artist for a number of local advertising agencies, had had several private showings in the Quarter, had contributed a number of worthwhile designs for the beautification of the city, many which had been used. He had worked out plans for canals, drainage, had submitted an overall design to the city for a seepage problem, had designed city parks, playgrounds, apartments, all ultra-modern in concept, all a little "way out" and not in keeping with the romantic idea of what New Orleans should be, or what most of its citizens thought it should be. Yet, despite this crave for the ultra-streamlined metropolis, his heart still lay toward the past, and he was steered stubbornly toward the melancholy symbolism of the old South, ante-bellum days, hoop skirted women, slaves, the Civil War. Through this persistent love, and through his prolonged research, he had turned out a guide to all the old pre-Civil War homes dotting Louisiana, and at present was working on an enormous project commissioned to him by the Restoration Club of the South... the building of, in exact replicas, and in scaled miniature, all the old homes of the state, those whose architectural plans could be accounted for, and all the others which remained intact, utilizing photographs and drawings and any other information obtainable. Later, he would go into the painstaking task of constructing models of those ante-bellum homes since destroyed by fire, relying completely on word of mouth by those who had lived beneath their roofs, and from photographs, if at all available.

It was a photograph of one of these such ancient dwellings

sent to him through the mail that he was doting over when the front doorbell rang. Automatically he glanced at the wall clock. It was ten in the morning. He wondered who could be calling at this hour.

He left the library, went down the shallow steps into the living room, into the portes cocheres... hallway... and to the door. He opened it and, a little surprised, stepped back a step.

A young man stood timidly on the red tiled gallery, a briefcase in one hand.

"Good morning," he said to Gill.

"Good morning." Gill replied, trying to remember where he had seen the face, that crown of platinum hair, those glittering black eyes. "Haven't we met before?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes," the boy said. "Don't you remember? I fixed your car not long ago... out there in front." He pointed to the street.

"Oh," Gill said, a little excited, "Stupid of me. Of course I remember. Come in."

The boy stepped politely into the richly carpeted hall, his handsome features sliced with an eager smile.

"My name is Pepper Lorrie," he introduced himself, thrusting out one heavily ringed hand. "Hope I'm not intruding?"

"By no means... NO," Gill exclaimed, shaking his hand and motioning him into the living room. "I owe you a drink anyway. Have a seat, there by window, and I'll fix you one... half way through a Planter's Punch myself."

"I didn't come here for that," the boy said, taking the seat indicated for him, and laying the briefcase on his lap.

"I know that," Gill said, "But the morning is hot, and we can talk better over a cool drink." He went behind a black marble bar which was trimmed in gold and filled two glasses with ice. "What's your poison?"

"A Manhattan, please," the boy said, taking out handkerchief and wiping his beaded brow. "It's a long walk from Canal."

"Gracious!" Gill cried, looking up from his drinks. "You walked all the way from downtown on a morning like this! Bet you're famished." He took the boy the Manhattan and sat down in a white leather chair opposite him. "Door to door salesman?"

"Well, not exactly," Pepper said, as if apologizing. "I'm in the photography business."

"I didn't think you were a salesman," Gill said, noticing the boy was nervously shy and anxious to place him at ease. "Salesmen don't usually dress as nicely as you do."

Gill made a quick inventory of the boy's clothes, admiring the way his pale gray Jaymar slacks trimmed to the stylish thirteen inches at the cuff, his elegant black hose, his polished Nettleton slippers.

"What kind of photography?" Gill probed, more curious about the handsome blond boy than his wares.

"Well," Pepper explained, fingering his briefcase, "I've just started actually. Not set up yet, like I'd love to be, studio and all. But I want to take photographs upon request, you understand? Photographs of anything, for ads, for artists to use as a guide, wedding pictures, even photographs of current events reporters and newspaper writers may use."

"I think that's a grand profession... er... Pepper," Gill said with delight, his pale eyes dancing. "A town like New Orleans certainly should keep you on the run. Do you know this place? I mean, are you familiar with everything here? Is New Orleans your home?"

"No," Pepper said nervously. "I'm not from here, but I intend to make New Orleans my home, that is, if I'm a success with... with my photo sales."

Gill glanced at him from head to toe in an instant.

"Well, you certainly are presentable. Have you tried some of the local modeling agencies? You should work well there, taking pictures of female models. Bet they go for you... don't they?"

Pepper blushed, then smiled a captivating smile, one that was not lost on Gill.

"I don't fool around girls much... er... Mr..."

"St Julien," Gill interrupted, finishing for him. "Please forgive me. I haven't introduced myself. I'm Gill St. Julien."

They shook hands again, this time a little embarrassed, having to switch hands with their drink, their palms wet from the sweating glasses.

"Why don't you fool around with girls?" Gill came back tartly, his pale eyes suddenly a dazzle.

"I don't have time much for playing," he answered, pointing to his briefcase. "Too ambitious, I guess."

"Well, I can understand that," Gill agreed, sipping his drink. "If you're blessed with ambition... or cursed... whichever the case might be, then it's the nose to the grindstone all your life. For one, I ought to know. I've studied all my life, and am still studying. There's no end to learning, Pepper, if you have that spark."

"But the results certainly show it," Pepper remarked, glancing about the sumptuous room, the marble, the gold, the rich drapes, the enormous statues in bronze and jade. "I can tell you are a success, that you make plenty of money."

Gill threw back his head, his chin thrust out with pride.

"Money yes," he boasted. "I do make good money, but this house, NO! I might as well confess. I haven't contributed much to this place, with exception of a few choice statues and modern

additions like radios and T.V. Father and Mother left me this house back in forty-six, right after the war. Both were killed in a car wreck, at a railroad crossing... up near St. Gabriel. Went to see a fool aunt of mine who was supposed to be dying. But she's still living, and Mother and Father died from the results of it." He frowned, then picked up again with his flamboyant air. "Anyway, Father did make good money, a brilliant architect, designed a number of the more elaborate buildings in the downtown section. Went to school for six years under Frank Lloyd Wright."

"A chip off the block then," the boy remarked, smiling a know-it-all smile.

"Hardly," Gill surmised, tilting back his head as his eyes fairly danced. "But thanks for the compliment anyway. No, I never had my father's talent, nor his drive. Wish I did. Nobody seems to have talent any more, not like people in my dad's day, or, maybe I was younger then and admired him so much I fail now to appreciate talent in people, even when they have it. But nowadays there are so many short cuts. No detail to things. No getting down and painstakingly working out complicated drawings, and designs. All this gaudy abstract, and laziness in art, and all this hippie happenings... oh God! Don't let me get started on that subject!"

"I see what you mean," Pepper said, the all agreeing attitude with everything Gill said, going downstream with the current, never doubling back in an effort to climb upstream in the scheme of things.

"Well," Gill said smiling. "I'm glad there's one young person left who doesn't wear Jesus hair and sandals."

"You don't have to worry about me ever doing anything like that," Pepper declared, as if he already belonged in some intimate way to Gill St. Julien.

"You know, I believe you," Gill said thoughtfully, seriously, and his pale gaze went up and down Pepper's stylist physique. "You're too clean cut to ever look like those shaggy tramps. You're like an ad, or one of those beautiful movie stars, you know, the kind you see on the screen who is always freshly laundered, every hair in place, not a single wrinkle in his suit, as if he's had to stand up before going on camera so that he won't get a wrinkle."

Pepper breathed heavily, smiled a toothy smile, and downed his drink unfashionably.

"You flatter me, Gill... er Mr. St. Julien. I just try to go neat all the time. I never could stand sloppiness. Even in pris... er... even in school I always went as neat as I could go. Always kept my hair combed, my nails trimmed... not like some boys I knew."

"And with nothing but straight A's on your report card, I bet," said Gill with an eager grin.

"I wasn't always the best of students," Pepper said, a little sheepish. "But I did manage to pass."

Gill's pale eyes were burning on him now, studying his every desirable and presentable feature.

"Would I be probing into your personal life if I asked you something intimately personal?" he asked, and with boldness, one of the more dominant weaknesses in the homosexual cult.

"Why no!" Pepper said, as if he knew beforehand what he was going to ask.

"Your hair! Is it really that blond, that platinum?"

"Yes," Pepper answered flatly, maybe too flatly. Gill jumped. "A lot of people think I've put dye in it, but I haven't ever, honest. It's for real."

"A regular male Jean Harlow," Gill said, smiling a come-on smile. "I like it, even if it is odd, and rare. I like rare things, rare people, and I like you, Pepper, would like to get to know you."

Pepper's expression lit up as though a bulb was turned on inside him, as though he had been plugged into an electrical circuit.

"I like you too," he confessed. "I don't know many people here in New Orleans. And I need someone like you, someone with influence who might help me in the photographic line."

That one word NEED seemed to snap something vital within Gill, for one eyebrow went up surprisingly, and his pale eyes blossomed into flame.

"I think I CAN help you at that," Gill said, all anxiety and frivolity now. "I'm going to need some photographs later, lots of them with the project I'm working on at present." He got up from his chair, sat his empty glass on the bar, and turned back to Pepper with anticipation and joy. "Would you like to see my project?"

"Why... of course!" Pepper said, all eyes and ears as he rose from his chair and returned the glass to the bar. "I know it must be interesting."

"Well, it *is* interesting to me," Gill said, leading the way. "I don't show just anyone my project, but I think you will enjoy it, and appreciate it, a boy with your talents."

"I know I will, Mr... er... Gill."

Gill led him through the library, down an oval ceilinged hall, and into an enormous workshop walled on three sides with glad Light flooded the place, and around the room on low shelves were hundreds of models of ante-bellum homes, many already complete with gardens and lawns and fields and moss-hung oaks so realistically carved they looked alive.

"My pride and joy," Gill said with elation, extending both arms.

"It's breathtaking!" Pepper exclaimed, as his curious gaze scanned the intricate details, the slaves in cotton wagons going to the fields, hoop-skirted women and elegantly dressed men out under moss-laden trees, filigreed eaves and carved capitals on the columns and many-paned windows and tiny dovecotes and slave cabins and actual cotton on high stalks. "Where did you ever find the patience?" he asked, making an obvious interest in the project for he sensed that Gill considered it the height of his career.

"Constant work creates patience," Gill surmised, as they moved from one ante-bellum home to another, the name of the home on a small bronze plaque attached to the model. With pride, Gill named each out loud, with the air of a tourist guide. "This is Rosedown, and this one is The Cottage, and here is Oaklawn Manor, and this one is Oakley, and here Lloyd's Hall, and Afton Villa, and Ashland Belle Helene, and Blue Rose and The Myrtles, and Parlange and Shadows on the Teche and the San Francisco."

"And all this detail," Pepper kept saying over and over as he studied each model with careful, deliberate scrutiny, knowing that by admiring them he was making an impression on Gill. "They remind me of those tiny soldiers I saw once in the Quarter."

"Thanks! Thanks!" Gill beamed with obvious pride. "Those little lead soldiers are world famous you know, so that puts me high on the list of model builders, I'm a stickler for details, as you can see. The smaller I can make them the more satisfied I am with my work."

"Well, they're small all right," Pepper said, leaning so that he could get a better look at a tiny doll in a yellow silk hoop skirt. "You even paint their eyes and lips, and there's a dog and a tiny cat, and even a bucket for the well... rope and all!"

Gill was beside himself!

"You do like them, don't you? I can tell."

Pepper raised up and smiled, his black eyes strangely lit.

"I love them!" he said with emphasis on the one word love. Then, with a cunning which Gill never suspected, he asked point blank, "How much are you getting for this project?"

Gill did not hesitate to answer.

"A thousand dollars a model!" He clapped his hands together, his pale blue eyes on Pepper sharp, persuasive. "Models come high you know."

"No, I didn't know," Pepper said, counting all the models in his mind. "A thousand dollars apiece! You're going to clean up with this job!"

"You bet," Gill laughed, showing two rows of glistening

white teeth. "When I'm finished with this project I'm going to retire to Bermuda."

Pepper looked at him with hard, cold eyes, deliberate, haunting.

"Wish I could go with you, Gill."

"Maybe you can, Pepper, maybe you can!" Gill said, patting Pepper on the shoulder. "I've just thought of something. I build these models from photographs you know, take a snapshot of all four sides then scale them out. You could be my photographer, you know. You could drop all this other miscellaneous work and I could put you on regular salary. What do you think of that?"

Pepper's lower jaw dropped, he was so surprised.

"I think it's great! When do I start?"

"Now, this moment!" Gill said, sparked with new energy. "This calls for a drink."

They returned to the living room and the bar where Pepper sat down on a zebra hide stool while he watched Gill mix two drinks.

"By the way," Gill remarked, his voice a little nervous, his fingers stirring the drinks atremor. "Where you staying?"

Pepper hesitated.

"With a friend of mine right now," he said finally, not looking at Gill.

"He a photographer too?"

"No, he's just rich. Don't have to work, I guess."

"That's nice," Gill murmured lowly, as if taken down a notch, or was being personally degraded. "Nice to be rich I mean. I know a number of wealthy people here. Maybe I know him."

Pepper swallowed hard. He took the drink and shoved it up to his lips in an unmannerly gesture.

"His name is... his name is Simon Shrader."

"Oh, I know him!" Gill shrieked in a loud voice, then dropped his tone with, "gay as a May pole dancer."

Pepper played it cool.

"I wouldn't know."

Gill looked up from his drink and their eyes met squarely, Gill's filled with question and speculation, Pepper's with bland innocence.

"I don't see how you could have kept the company of that swishing sister without knowing something."

Pepper shrugged.

"I don't care what a guy is... or does... long as he keeps his distance."

Gill laughed. "That's one thing Simon Shrader isn't going to ever keep," he said, "and that's his distance, especially around a young man as well put together as you are, Pepper. Nobody, and I mean noooobodddy gets by that stingy bitch."

"Nobody touches me," Pepper said. Then on second thought, "That is, unless I want them to."

"Oh, well," Gill shrugged, with a casual brushoff of the word. But his eyes were leaping with lights. "Why don't you move in here with me. First thing you know, if you continue to live with her she'll come up pregnant and sue you for child support."

Pepper flushed. Gill KNEW!

"There's plenty of room," Gill went on, hopeful. "And you'll be close by when I need you for an assignment. How long have you lived with this Simon?"

"Not long," was Pepper's apt reply. Actually, he didn't know. Days just passed, then weeks.

"You must have a lot of guts. He's as mixed-up as a circus freak. A man one minute, a woman the next. I'll declare, he spends more money on clothes. And he doesn't look like much either way, though God knows he pays enough for his get ups, and all those fancy wigs and gowns and nothing but Botany 500's."

"He's been swell to me," Pepper remarked, with nothing better to add.

Gill lifted an eyebrow.

"Oh, that's true! That's his big come on. If he wants someone he doesn't mind flashing the greenbacks. I can say that much for her, when it comes to her own selfish desires she doesn't mind writing out a check that would break a bank. A big put on! Shows, the theatre, her readings, her lousy poetry. Damn! And to just imagine that at one time I actually thought that hussy was straight."

"So you want me to move in?" Pepper reminded Gill. He didn't give a damn about Simon's antics. Wasn't Gill what he came to New Orleans for?

"Yes, I definitely do," Gill assured, his voice back to normal, his bitchiness vanishing as his true, desirable masculinity took its place. "There's a lot of work to be done, frankly, and you and I should hit it off just fine. I can tell you're an ambitious kid."

If he only knew, Pepper hummed to himself, pleased with his own tact. His gaze devoured the grandeur of his new surroundings, the place that was to be his home, if but momentarily. And he sized up Gill too. He wasn't at all like Simon. He was truly a he-man in all appearances, as Otis Pigott had once informed him, and even if the guy was a fruit he was the kind of guy you didn't mind having around. Not like Simon, who always embarrassed him in public, pawing, saying girlish things, coming on strong... like everybody in the world were queer and it was the straight thing to do.

Yet, even though he looked the place and Gill over like he was taking mental inventory of a shiny new car or something, in

the back of his mind reared the one crucial thought, *What does this cat do to get his tricks? Hope he isn't a shit and piss man, or tikes it up the ass tike Simon.*

Gill noticed Pepper studying him and mistook it for interest.

"Suppose we take a swim... get better acquainted. I'll chuck my work for the day, declare myself a holiday."

Pepper felt he could use a refreshing dip after his long hot walk.

"Sounds swell to me." His glance fell on the pool shimmering all clear and green and inviting through the tall French windows. "You can brief me on my duties."

"Good," Gill agreed. He looked at Pepper, a long see-through look. "Well... let's peel."

"Could you loan me a swimsuit?" Pepper asked, a little embarrassed.

"Good gracious! You don't need a swimsuit. Ever heard of mother nature?" Then he added thoughtfully. "No one's to see us. We're completely walled in in the back. Seclusion is the magic word. Everyone in the Quarter has their own private courtyard. It's the in thing."

Pepper got out of his clothes.

"Okay... you've talked me into it."

A moment more and he stood naked, his suntanned body bathed in the clean morning light.

Gill took a meaningful look. His gaze went from Pepper's head to his toes in a manner of seconds. His expression flushed. Suddenly his eyes took on a dazzling look, as if tiny tights were on behind them.

"No wonder Simon flipped his lid over you," he said in a shaky voice. His clothes off, he strolled toward the windows where Pepper stood. His gaze never left Pepper's groin.

In turn, as all men will do, Pepper took deliberate scrutiny of Gill's body. For a fruit, he considered, he was in hell of good shape physically.

And he was hung too. Pepper's gaze locked on Gill's crotch. He had a lot of wild thick hair, and his prick was long with a lot of loose skin, and his balls almost hung mid-thigh. His legs and arms were good too, bronzed, veined, and rippling with good sound muscle.

"You must lift weights," Pepper suggested, using this as an excuse to study Gill's nakedness without looking suspiciously queer.

Gill, likewise, kept looking.

"Since high school," he answered, rubbing his own chest and flat, hard belly with both hands, his long tapering fingers feeling through his patches of chest and belly hair. "I'm not

one to just let myself go. A stitch in time saves nine, as the old saying goes. So it's best to keep in good physical shape than it is to try and gain it back once you're soft and flabby." His silvery eyes froze on Pepper's every move. "You're built like a brick shithouse yourself," he added, smiling. "And there's not a blemish on you. Not one mole, not one scar, not one, and I mean not ONE TATTOO!"

"Never went in for that body art," Pepper confirmed, preening his own muscles. He allowed his hands to slide down his stomach, and down to mid-thigh where he gripped the rounded leg muscles with a firm grip, "if I wanted that shit on me I'd go join up with a fucking circus."

"Thank God... for once!" Gill said, rolling his long-lashed eyes. "Every kid you see nowadays looks like a walking art gallery."

"I'll drink to that," said Pepper, admiring his own body. In a gesture of unconsciousness, yet deliberate, he allowed one hand to retreat back up his leg to cup one of his balls. He stood, as if waiting for something to happen, for Gill to make the obvious move, his thighs invitingly spread, his prick growing minutely.

Something electric snapped in the air.

Gill swallowed hard. Every vein in both their bodies suddenly came alive, triggering something within them.

Gill moved closer to where Pepper stood. Then, almost as if it was the most probably thing to do, he reached out his long, heavily veined arm and caught hold of Pepper's hardening prick.

His voice shook. "I don't usually get this carried away," he said. Then he added rather lowly, almost in a whisper, "Guess you know... I'm gay?"

Pepper could not speak. But he nodded slightly then watched as Gill's huge hand worked his prick out and in from the nest of hair. Gill's long fingers coiled about it like snakes, and they were warm and soothing and made Pepper feel pleasure in his groin. A little embarrassed, he could only stand and let Gill play with him. It felt too wonderful for him to ask Gill to let go, or to brush his hand away. Yet, he realized that if Gill kept it up, working his fingers up and around the head, skinning it back and forth, he would come.

"You've got a beautiful prick, Pepper," said Gill, with a lump in his throat. "Did you know that?"

Pepper nodded. "I like it." His stare fell on Gill's prick, now hard and firm and jutting out in front of him. The meaty head was enormous. Where it flared out in the rear the rim protruded, and the loose skin, as it hardened rapidly tightened like wet plastic. Blue veins stood out now, running wild the length of it, and with his prick turgid now, Pepper could see

just how huge his balls were hanging there between his long slender legs. Pepper was becoming affected by Gill's prick and balls in their wild patch of hair, and before he realized what he was doing, he reached down and caught hold of it. He felt of the head, cupping it with his stubby fingers, then slid his hand down until he touched the pubic hair. At that location, he squeezed a little harder on the elongated meat, felt the heat of it, and noticed how the veins strutted from the pressure of his fingers, how the color of it reddened, and how purplish the head turned. With his fingers gripping the base, he was cutting off the flow of blood, and Gill's prick became even fatter, swelled and bloated.

Gill, with his thighs spread, relished the feel of Pepper's hands and, moving in closer, ran his free hand around Pepper's body and began to fondle his behind.

"I want to suck you... to give you a thrill," he whispered to Pepper, their faces close, the heat from their bodies like a steam between them.

With that one lovable cue, Pepper let go of Gill's Prick and, spreading his legs and placing both hands on his hips, gave the sign.

Gill dropped to his knees. Taking hold of Pepper's prick, he sucked it into his mouth and, with one long forward thrust, swallowed it to the hair. Gripping Pepper's flanks, he worked his body with his hands, back and forth, allowing Pepper's hard prick to slide in and out of his mouth. With his lolling tongue he made circles around Pepper's prick, at moments sucking only the head, tightening his lips around the meaty rim, putting pressure on his gums and thrusting his tongue into the opening on the end, waiting for the come.

Pepper had been sucked numerous times, but this was the first time anyone had sucked it who could take it so thoroughly. Gill's mouth pumped from the head to the pubic hair in one sliding motion of his head, and all the while he was doing this his tongue coiled and pulled and made hot caresses the full length of Pepper's prick. It was too much and, as Pepper felt all worked up and without control of his physical system he spermed, flooding Gill's mouth. Pepper's rump went rigid. He lay his warm hands on each side of Gill's face, held his head lovingly as the streams of hot sperm exploded and escaped his groin.

Gill drank him like a man on starvation. And long after Pepper had shot his load Gill still stripped down his prick with his tightly pressed lips, keeping his tongue ready at the slit to mop up what was left.

Famished, Pepper caught hold of his prick at the base to eject it from Gill's mouth, but Gill sank down to the carpet and

pulled Pepper with him. Gill, flat on his back, his knees up and spread wide apart, began to jack off. He made long, deliberate strokes, and Pepper watched him out of some kind of unfamiliar curiosity and fascination. Caught up in the wild tide of Gill's self-absorption, thrilled momentarily by Gill's huge hands working on his own prick, Pepper lost something of his own control, his masculine reserves.

Sliding down Gill's long, wiry body, he took hold of Gill's prick and relieved him of having to work it himself. Gill's prick in Pepper's hand throbbed hotly, and it stood there so huge, so long, so choked with big blue veins, and so surrounded with curly body hair that Pepper could only play with it and stare.

Directly, as Gill mumbled, "Baby... I'm coming!" Pepper did an unexpected thing. Leaning over quickly, he cupped the head of Gill's prick between his lips and began to roll his tongue. The head was spongy and hot and raided Pepper's mind with its sex smell. Then, the hot sperm shot into his mouth, flooding his tongue and like a hungry, greedy child he began to drink it down. It came so fast it almost choked him, and it was all he could do to swallow it in time. Still gripping the long meat stem, he lapped up the last wonderful dram, then almost with a gesture of kissing, slipped his lips from off the head, as the masculine smell came with it, a smell so strong, so wonderful Pepper became intoxicated.

"God! That was wonderful," Gill gasped in pure bliss.

At the sound of Gill's voice, almost hard and clattering in its awakening, Pepper sensed what he had done. He came to reality with a shock, and fell back limply on the soft downy carpet. Sweat popped out on his brow. His hands and feet felt clammy. And there was a nauseating sensation in the pit of his gut.

"That's the first time... I've never done that," he said meakly, laying a sweaty hand on his forehead. He felt he was going to be sick.

"Don't know it," Gill praised. "You were sensational!"

"Must be turning into a fucking mermaid," Pepper complained, mocking someone else long ago (he had heard a Swedish sailor say that), "never thought I'd sink to... this."

Gill tried to console him.

"Now... now, it's not the end of the world. Millions of men, and I mean millions have sucked cock. It's not a crime you know."

"Oh, I know that," said Pepper, doubtful. It seemed like a crime to him now, in one sense of the word but wonderful in another. He could not deny to himself that he had enjoyed it. It was something different, he admitted, and there he placed all

blame. Just kicks! Yet, something told him acutely that this was not his true nature, just as having Sharkey Rider ram his big prick up his rump wasn't his true nature either. Yet there had been carnal moments, starved for sex and violence, gutted with loneliness, when he had actually enjoyed Sharkey riding him to climax. Though he had never regarded himself as a girl boy, it had kind of been vaguely kinky to have a man like Sharkey taking his body and his sex. It was like giving a gift to someone, something they would be proud of.

"I've always just let other guys drink my load. Never thought I'd turn so nelly I'd be drinking theirs."

Gill raised up on one elbow and looked at Pepper with a look that went to the back of his mind.

"Listen, kid. I don't have a disease or nothing. And come isn't poison, and you're not going to become pregnant... so why all the fuss?"

"I don't know," Pepper answered. "It's just that it's new to me, I reckon, between another man's legs."

"Well... if you enjoyed it."

"Guess I did, a little," Pepper said in a whisper. Yet, as he lay there on the white fur carpet beside Gill, he considered how oddly things had turned for him. He had come to New Orleans purposely just to swindle Gill out of his loot, to make a complete fool out of him, to get even with all queers through him. Yet, he had ended up sucking this man's prick. It didn't make sense.

"If you were a kid," Gill went on, running a forefinger along Pepper's bicep, "I'd feel guilty too, like contributing to a minor. But you and I are both grown men, Pepper, and deserve the right to do what we please sexually, so long as we don't offend anyone else. We haven't harmed ourselves physically, and we have forced no harm on anyone else. So, why make a tempest out of a teapot. Frankly, I thought it was great. We get on splendid together. We fit, like a man and a woman. It's what I love to do... to suck and get sucked. I don't mean I like for some shitty faggot to swing on my rod, I never could go for all that. But if I like someone and he is manly... like you... and you suck me, then all the better. It makes sex all the more wonderful. When two masculine men go to bed together, Pepper, like each other, then something happens to their reasoning... like you a minute ago. You are all man and I am all man and our bodies are too strong for each other, like magnets. We see and feel our own masculinity in the other's body, and we wouldn't be real he-men if we were not affected by the sight of another man's nudity. It's like looking in a mirror. You see something of yourself in your male sex partner. You jack off, don't you?"

"Sometimes," Pepper confessed.

"Do you feel guilt about that?"

"Nah... why should I?"

"Well, it's the same as jacking off another guy. You love holding your own prick in your hand you love to look at your hard prick and balls and all that hair while you are jacking off... that's how you get aroused in the first place, admiring your own sexual potentials. So, when you play with another man's prick it's the same as watching yourself in a mirror."

Pepper studied for a moment.

"What about the sucking part?"

"The same thing. When the sperm squirts out of your dick, you have this subconscious desire to taste it And haven't you tasted your own come? Of course you have, if only by licking your fingers afterwards or putting a finger in your mouth. It's like a cycle in the male, I think, like some wild animals. They shoot their sperm into a female... the female bears their offspring, then the male eats the young. The desire to take back what it gives. That is why, I do honestly believe, when two real he-men get together and have sex there is a deep compulsion, a fierce power which draws them together, and they rebel through their sexual act by drinking sperm. Once two real he-men have drunk it they become drugged. I think that is why a lot of homosexuals foul up. Once they have tasted of a real savage man, a man who naturally caters to women, they lose their powers of reason and logic. So they have to take the bad to get the good." He paused, studied Pepper's starry gaze. "With you and me, everything can be so perfect. We are of a different breed than other homosexuals, though there are millions like us. We are a race apart from the nellies and the swishers, as far apart as the straights are from the swishers."

"I believe that too," Pepper said, feeling alive and hopeful for the first time in many months. "We can do what we want to, without looking so goddamned fruity."

"That's right," Gill confirmed. "Actually we are straight. We just like the excitement of another he-man's nudity, to take him sexually then let it go at that."

"I hate all that loving, and kissing junk, like with Simon."

Gill sighed.

"Well, you won't ever have to worry about that with me. If I wanted a woman I'd get a woman. But two men can love each other, and strong, without making love, kissing and fondling. What is the old saying? Oh, yes I remember now. The embrace of the eyes can be as strong as the embrace of the arms."

Pepper grinned, feeling pensive and contented. "I like that. I kinda felt a power when we first met, like them horse-shoe magnets popping together. It's a hard feeling to explain."

"But the most wonderful feeling in the world," said Gill with wisdom. "There is no love, no power on earth stronger nor more compelling and overwhelming than the love of two real savage he-men. It's a force impossible to break."

Pepper looked down the length of Gill's naked body, sensed the wildness and maleness in him at the sight of the curling pubic hair, his long prick now limber and laying idle against his thigh, his balls like ripe melons in their limp sling. He could feel the male heat seeping up to him, could smell the rich male scent, and all this male power seemed to wrap him in a cloak of protectiveness and awe, and in turn to give him power, like the blood in the veins of one man being siphoned through the veins of another. Both men were stimulants for the other.

Gill sat up and rested his elbows on his knees. As he did so, his limp prick rolled down between his balls and slept. Leaning, Gill sucked up Pepper's limp prick into his warm mouth, lovingly, almost tenderly. Then he slapped him on the rump, roughly, firmly, but playfully.

"Want that swim?" Pepper questioned, yet loving Gill's mouth and tongue over his prick, the way his face buried up in his thick woolly crotch hair.

"I'd forgotten," Gill said, slipping Pepper's prick out of his mouth and getting to his feet. "If I hang around you often enough I'll be taking lockjaw." Then more seriously, meaningfully. "Pepper, this is our beginning. Let's make it a wonderful relationship. Let's live for each other, thrill each other sexually, admire each other as men, and talk and go places and act like other real he-men... what do you say?"

Though what Gill said shattered his schemes, his long-laid plans, Pepper answered with, "I'd like that, Gill. Honest."

5

On Friday, July 22nd, 1967 two men sat at a little roadside cafe on highway fifty one in the town of Independence, Louisiana. They were escapees from Angola prison.

One wing of the cafe was walled with glass panes and where they both sat they had a full view of the Lollie Kemp charity hospital where, on the previous night, they had stolen two apple green intern uniforms from a laundry bag. They were wearing them now, and with the exception of black motorcycle boots, where the loose trousers at intervals tugged into the cuffs, they looked exactly like a number of other interns in green who always crowded the roadhouse around evening meal time.

They were named Sharkey Rider and Otis Pigott.

A regular Mutt and Jeff, for one was a giant and the other one a midget, in comparison to the five feet seven inches which was considered the normal height for man.

Sharkey Rider was over six feet tall and weighed two hundred and sixty-four pounds, all rock hard muscle, without an ounce of fat showing. Broad of shoulder, narrow and flat of hip, with enormous forearms and thighs, his body completely covered with a riot of wiry black hair, he resembled more a movie idol than a prison escapee. He had long black Indian straight hair which was parted on one side and combed back evenly to a point at the nape of his long, powerful neck. His cheekbones were high and protruding, his nose thick, his lips a little pouty, and had wide set blue eyes that had a kindness in their gaze, sky blue, untroubled, forever smiling. When he spoke, his voice too was liquid, kind to sonants, passionate, deeply southern.

His arms were clean, smooth of skin beneath their mats of wiry hair, and there were no scars nor blemishes to mar their exposure as something repulsive and profaned. Though his palms were calloused from hard prison labor, his hands too were clean, the nails neatly trimmed, without a trace of dirt beneath. His face was clean shaven, his thick beard leaving a hue of pale gray on the skin where it had been cut with a razor, and his hair was clean and shiny in the evening light.

Otis Pigott was only five feet tall, and weighed less than a hundred pounds. His hair also was black like Sharkey's and long, but a mass of curly ringlets which fell over his wrinkled brow and coiled stubbornly around his tiny shell-like ears. Dark, acorn dark, his small body was also covered with hair, and he looked like a monkey, so pinched were his facial features, his lips too thick, too protruding, his eyes dark, evasive, deep pools of light which kept shifting from one object to another. Two deep ruts ran down each side of his nose, around his mouth,

and all but tipped his jaw bone, and one of these, the right one, was intercepted by a tiny white scar which shone in the hot light like the scales of a fish. Though his naked arms were impressive, hard and rounded of muscle and mapped with veins, they were marred by knife scars and enormous tattoos. On his right arm was a panther with red claw marks, the initials O.B.P. worked in lacy scroll, and on his left, just above his wrists was a band going all the way around—like a bracelet—a tiny blue star with red rays, and the word love.

His hands were unusually small, even for his slight physique, thick, the fingers blunt on the ends, his white nails dirty and broken, stained from tobacco and paint.

Both men looked ill at ease, always looking up from their meal of cheeseburgers and coffee whenever someone came into the cafe, overly polite to the waiter, and with the constant maneuver of trying to keep their faces in profile with that of the numerous interns who crowded around the other tables.

At intervals they glanced through the shiny clean panes at the crowds of patients going to and from the wards, mostly Negroes, and most of them with their arms and legs in plaster casts, on crutches or canes. Many had patches over their eyes, some had their skulls completely in white bandages, and among them were a noisy horde of children, all of whom carried bandages somewhere on their person.

"Pepper is gonna be in a cast if he don t... cooperate," said the one called Otis, as with beaded eyes he watched the hospital then back to Sharkey who had all but swallowed his cheeseburger whole.

"He'll cooperate," Sharkey reminded him, his voice low, stern. "Put my rod up his ass, he'll cooperate for sure."

Otis let out an amused chuckle.

"He sure was afraid of you in the can," he said, laughing between every word. "Thought you was gonna squeal to all those other punks and they'd gang bang him."

Sharkey caught Otis off guard with his cold blue eyes.

"I wouldn't have squealed on the kid. I liked him. Pepper's just too soft hearted. Anybody who would steal a twenty-five dollar watch out of a jewelry store and go up for theft bound to be a little soft in the head, or heart, or ass, or somewhere."

Otis kept laughing.

"You ought to know about the ass part, Shark."

"Pepper tell you."

"Yeah, spilled his guts to me. Like I was a head shrinker or something. He hated your guts, you know that, don't you, Shark?"

Sharkey swallowed hard, restirred his coffee, and sat quiet for a moment.

"No... I didn't know," he said at last, not looking at Otis who grinned at him with a know-it-all expression. "Yeah, Pepper's gonna cooperate, all right," he added in a firm, flat voice, clicking his teeth. "We're gonna take that fruity friend of his to the cleaners, and little Pepper's gonna help us. He's gonna do all the work. You and me just gonna walk in and help ourselves and he ain't gonna call the fuzz and if he does he's gonna take all the blame." He looked up at Otis, his blue eyes now burning with a fierce light Otis had never seen in them before. "So he don't like me, huh?"

"Now don't go getting roiled at me, Shark," Otis said, beginning to squirm in his seat. "That's what Pepper boy said. I'm just telling you what he said. He might be in love with you for all I know. But that's what he said, Shark, scout's honor!" Mockingly, he help up his right hand.

Sharkey punched him in the ribs with the prong of his fork.

"Read me that letter again he wrote."

"Why?"

"Just read it! I want to see if I understood it right, if he might of put something between the lines I didn't catch at first."

Otis glared at him in a small, defenseless fury.

"I've already read it ten times."

"Then read it eleven, or twelve!" Sharkey bellowed, glaring at him from across the table. "You want my rod in your behind?"

Otis rolled his eyes in mock charade.

"Nooooooo Sirrrrrreeeeee!" he stammered, laughing nervously.

"A mare couldn't take that root you got!"

Sharkey punched him with his fork again.

"Read it!"

Otis, with a tremor of his thick fingers, took the out of the uniform pocket and unfolded it on the table. Then he read, at first slow, deliberate, pronouncing each word separately, with a pause between, then he picked up speed toward the end.

"Read it again!" Sharkey demanded, his brow mapped with a series of wrinkles. "I didn't catch that last part."

Otis, in quiet retaliation, reread the letter,

"Dear Otis baby;

"Bet you're surprised to hear from me. You was right. This Gill St. Julien is the perfect score. Met a fruit here who set me up with some fancy duds and picture taking equipment. I did what you told me to do. I didn't let Gill know I was hustling. Playing it cool, man. I am working for him now. Taking pictures of them old houses that should have fell down years ago. I kind of like it though. And I like Gill. He is the best friend I have ever had, honest. It is like living in a different kind of world

with him. Three good meals a day. A room all my own. With a bath. And glad rags, man, I got them. He pays me in real bread, and for the first time in my life someone is interested in me. I have a whole new outlook on life. Honest. I am a changed man, Otis baby. You wouldn't believe it.

Love you

Pepper

"P.S. Forget what I told you in the can about getting even with fruits!"

When he finished reading the letter, he folded it neatly, as if it was a sacred object, and returned it to his pocket.

Sharkey breathed heavily, stared out the window, his lips going down at one corner.

"So, he's a changed man," he grunted, as if he deeply regretted the change, and fought his inner conscience to do something about it. "Living high on the hog!"

"Why of course, naturally," Otis chimed in, the nasal twang of his deeply southern drawl shattering the stillness like breaking glass. "Can't you see! That's why he don t want to do anything to this guy. He's living it up too easy, don't want us to get our hands on any of it. It's as clear as hill spring water!"

"Ain t that why we broke outa the can," Sharkey reminded him, grunting with a wicked smile, "to get our mitts on some of that loot. Pepper s done gone and got greedy. He wants it all for himself. Don't want to divide with his friends."

"He don t want that fruit mussed up either," Otis added, supreme in his ill-fated knowledge. "Wants him all lovey-dovey!"

Sharkey slammed his fork against his plate. It rang with a clang.

"Putting out that fine ass of his," he said with acid bitterness. "I always figured he liked it more than he let on!" Otis let out a ridiculous laugh.

"Boy! if you don't take the cake! You're jealous, man!"

Sharkey glared at him with mischievous eyes, their agates like the blue white heat of the stars.

"You keep talking that shit and I'll tie you in a Pretzel and swallow you with a swig of beer. So shut your trap!"

Otis shut up.

"Sharkey," he said with affection in his voice, a little resentful of his attitude, but fearful of what he might do if he pressed his luck with further accusations. "Now that we're outa the jug, free, ready to make our haul, what kinds of plans you got? I gotta know."

Sharkey smacked his lips, leaned back in his chair, and stared out the window. "Don't get your brain in an uproar. I got

it all figured. It'll work like a charm. Come dark, we get out on that highway and thumb us a ride into New Orleans. Then, hello Mr. Pepper, good-bye Mr. St. Julien."

"Please, Shark! I gotta know!"

"Shut your trap, before I stuff it with my rod!"

6

"Are you sure you don't want to go out?" Gill said as a last resort, still standing above Pepper, desirous to please him but at a momentary loss. "There's a good movie at the Orpheum and at the Saenger. We can go like we are."

"I don't think so," Pepper answered, putting down his book. "I'm too contented where I am. Lazy tonight I reckon."

Gill's gaze burned with a new, speculative light as he whispered, "Something else in mind then? Say my boudoir?"

Pepper smiled, "Maybe."

Gill's gaze locked on Pepper's crotch, noticed its protruded hump in his patterned shorts. The sight affected him greatly. Laying an affectionate hand on the nape of Pepper's neck, Gill pulled his face to his hip, patted him on the cheek.

"I love you more than life itself," he murmured, held him for a moment. Thank God for the day you fixed my car. It brought us together."

Pepper looked up at him, his eyes bleeding compassion.

"I'm glad I stopped. We never would have met if I hadn't, would we?"

Gill shook his head in utter thanksgiving, and they both fell to silence, as if they measured their good luck and prayed for its continuance.

The telephone rang.

"Oh, my god," Gill stormed, breaking reluctantly away from Pepper and going to where it stood on the marble-topped table. "Bet that's Norman or Jester, wanting to come over for a drink... what'll I tell them?"

"Say we're working," Pepper advised quickly, for he wasn't in the mood for frivolity.

"It's for you," Gill said, after picking up the receiver.

"For me!" Pepper leaped up, went across the room where Gill held out the receiver for him. He took it reluctantly, almost with guilt, as if he had been caught in the act of wrongdoing.

"Hello," he said timidly.

"Hello," came the voice on the other end of the line.

"Guess who this is?"

"I'm at a loss," Pepper replied blushing.

"It's your old fuck-buddy, Sharkey Rider!" came the voice.

Pepper went deathly white.

"Oh, how you doing?" he asked, after a moment's silence. He fumbled with the cord, twisted it into knots. "Where are you?"

"I'm downtown," Sharkey said, laughing hatefully. "Right smack in your little old town. Cut myself out of the can, me and guess who?"

"I don't know," Pepper said, his voice shaking. "Who?"

"Little ole Otis! You remember Otis, don't you?"

"Sure" Pepper stammered.

"Is that fruit around? I want to talk at you about something."

Pepper gulped.

"Yes." He shot a glance at Gill who, feeling he was an extra in the conversation, had moved to the opposite side of the room and was thumbing through the copy of *Ghosts Along The Mississippi*.

"Get rid of him!"

With eyes blinking back tears, Pepper looked at Gill.

Gill contemplated his cue.

"I'll go fix us both a drink," he said lowly, leaving the library and hurrying into the living room.

"He's gone," Pepper said to Sharkey, in a whisper.

"Good, Pepper boy," muttered Sharkey, and there was a chuckle on the other end of the line. Otis, Pepper concluded nervously. He switched the receiver to the other ear. His hand felt damp, clammy.

"What do you want?" he asked, almost frantically. "Gill'll be back in a minute. I can't hang on long."

"You'll find a way to hang on," Sharkey warned him, as beads of sweat began to pop out of Pepper's forehead. "Listen and you listen good! Otis and me... we're in a jam, see. Broke out the can, like I done told you. We need some clothes, bad, man! The fuzz is gonna nab us good understand? Some clothes, and some lettuce! You got that? Where does the fruit live?"

Trembling all over, Pepper told him.

"That's a good boy. Remind me to put it to you in the ass sometime, give you a thrill. Where you gonna be? How we gonna get in, without that fuckin' fruit getting wise?"

Pepper thought for a moment.

"Come round to the back. I'll be waiting. Down in the garage."

"See you in ten minutes," said Sharkey, and hung up.

Gill returned with two drinks. With a quivering hand Pepper took one and began to gulp it down. His mind whirled like a treadmill. He felt faint, almost giddy. He clutched for the table as a means of support.

"Something wrong?" Gill asked thoughtfully, noticing.

"It's nothing," Pepper assured him, fighting all his reserves in a frantic effort to pull himself together. "I think I left some books down in the car. I'll be back in a minute... baby."

Gill gave him a quizzical stare.

"Sure."

Pepper finished this drink, set the empty glass on Gill's elaborate desk and went down the hall, passed the workshop and went into his own private bedroom. He took a shirt and slacks from a rack for Sharkey, and eased catlike down the back steps which opened into the garage.

He had but a moment to wait.

He heard their shuffling feet on the winding tile pavement which circled the house from the garage and down to the street. There was a slow tapping on the garage door. He opened it and let them through.

"Boy! Glad to see you," Sharkey muttered loudly, completely forgetting himself, grabbing Pepper and hugging him close.

"Sheeeee!" Pepper warned, pulling himself free of Sharkey's grasp. "He's right upstairs. We gotta be careful."

Otis grinned at him, a grin Pepper returned with coldness, aloofness.

"You really scored!" he cried in a rasping voice, as the moved about nervously, studied the car, the mower, the tools. "Didn't he, Shark. Pepper boy really scored!"

Pepper handed them the clothes, noticed with alarm their apple green uniforms, their ill-kept appearance. They looked downright haggard, starved. In the semi-darkness their eyes were like animals, stabbing at him in the unlit garage. He watched cautiously as they took off their uniforms, stood completely naked for a moment, then got into the clothes he had furnished.

"What about some lettuce?" Sharkey mumbled, as he studied himself in Gill's clothes.

Pepper handed him the two twenties.

"It's all I got right now. But it'll give you a start."

"Sure, Pepper baby," Sharkey said lovingly, patting him on the cheek. "I understand. But there's more where that came from, now ain't there, a truckload of it!"

"What do you mean?" Pepper stammered, as he suddenly seemed aware, keyed in to their schemes.

"Just like I said, baby. There's plenty more where this came from, and you gonna help us clean this chick's house."

A cold chill ran up Pepper's spine.

The two rushed to the garage door.

"Hang close to that phone, Pepper baby," Sharkey warned him, as he and Otis slid into night shadows. "We'll keep in touch."

Then they were gone, the eerie laugh of Otis's ringing in the hot darkness.

Like a sleepless sleepwalker, Pepper climbed the narrow steps to the upper hall. His legs were like water, and over and over in his brain whirled the sudden fear and apprehension the hated appearance of Sharkey Rider and Otis Pigott had hurled,

unannounced, into his happy life. In a quagmire of dread he saw his future, his life with Gill being shredded away, torn, mutilated by their wild, savage doings, and he let out a nauseating whimper at the hostile possibility.

Later that night, as he lay in bed, Gill beside him, the light of his cigarette illuminating their naked bodies in a glow of red, sleep impossible, he tossed and turned, his brain on fire, his guts bending in knots.

"That phone call?" Gill asked lowly, almost dreamily, as he lay a warm hand on Pepper's shoulder.

"Yes," Pepper answered, after a long, drawn out pause.

"Want to tell me about it?"

Another pause. Pepper took a long draw off his cigarette, blew out the smoke. Then he snuffed it out in the tray.

"I wish I could tell you. But I can't. I just can'!"

7

Pepper sat with Sharkey and Otis in the darkened corner of the FINALE, dwarfed by the enormous blowup photographs of movie stars which were plastered to the walls: Garbo and Gable and Monroe, along with Marlon Brando and James Dean in black leather motorcycle jackets and a larger than life picture of John Payne in a more than revealing swim suit.

Pepper, nervous of the outcome of this situation, twitched his fingers. He had been forced to meet the two, or bribed. They had warned him by phone if he did not show, did not cooperate, they would inform Gill St. Julien of his prison record, and his life as a hustler, and his falsified admittance into his home as a pretended photographer. Knowing them thoroughly in Angola, and how else could one know a man better than when he was stripped of every potential, Pepper had gone along with their demands.

It was Thursday night of August 10th, 1967. It was around eleven-twenty in the evening, and the place was jumping.

"Hated like all hell and gone to do this to you, Pepper boy," Sharkey was saying, as he flanked one side of Pepper, Otis flanking the other, like protective guards, "but Otis and me, we're in a tight spot. We got to load up, get moving, and I mean gone, gone from this scabby town 'fore the fuzz gets wise."

Pepper shot him a puzzled look, trying to appear wrathful, but every nerve tightened and relaxed nervously beneath throbbing muscle and limb. He was afraid. Deathly afraid. Not of his own safety - though he had considered this ever since that first phone call, living in constant dread-but of his and Gill's future together. If he lost that, he would lose every connection to life, that part of life worth living, and he clung to his and Gill's relation frantically, tried to build up a wall between his world and that of Sharkey's and Otis's.

"Just what is it you want me to do?"

Sharkey looked at Otis, Otis at Sharkey. They both gave a loud chuckle, a laugh that made Pepper's hair seem to stand up on end.

"We want you to help us take that fruit to the cleaners," said Sharkey, and with the casual air of asking Pepper for the time of day. "Now, that ain't much, now is it?"

"No, that ain't much, is it, Shark?" Otis repeated, like a trained parrot who had learned one simple phrase.

"But... but I like Gill," Pepper stammered. "Gill's been better to me than anybody I've ever known. He's the only true friend I got, honest."

"We ain't your friends?" Sharkey asked, nudging Pepper in the ribs.

"Why... eh ... yes," Pepper managed to say, staring at his drink. "But Gill... Gill's given me my first real break. And I can't turn on him. I just I can't! Honest, fellows. You don't know what it's been like all my life. Ain't nobody ever took up for me, or given me anything... except Gill."

"We don't know how it is!" Sharkey grunted, his deeply masculine voice sounding above the humming noise of the crowds and the blaring jukebox. "How come Otis and me don't know? We been in the can too, remember, or have you been living so high on the hog you've forgotten me and Otis?"

"No," Pepper assured them in a low voice. "I haven't forgotten."

"Well, now that's more like it." Sharkey put his huge muscular arm around Pepper's shoulder. "We've all had a lousy go at it, eating that slop, working in the fields, doing without pussy... oh, beg your pardon, Pepper baby... I wasn't referring to you... you got a nice, fine little ass, but all we want to do is to get you to move over just a little, let us in on some of that priceless loot."

Pepper picked up his drink nervously, gulped down a swallow.

"You mean you mean rob Gill?"

Sharkey let out an animal grunt. He laughed softly, his beautiful teeth catching and reflecting the light.

"Well... it finally soaked through. Of course we want you to help us rob him... now what else did you think we scratched our way out of the can for, to get chased by the fuzz like two wild cats?"

"I didn't ask you to escape," Pepper said, with a moment of unexpected courage.

"Now, that's right, you didn't," Sharkey agreed. "But it was your idea in the first place, remember, to take it out on queers, just 'cause I had a little harmless fun with your behind."

"Fun!" Pepper choked.

Sharkey and Otis laughed uproariously.

"Didn't think I knowed that, did you, Pepper baby," Sharkey ridiculed. "Otis here let me in on the scoop. You hate my guts, don't you, 'cause I put the rod to you, don't you?"

Pepper shot Otis an insolent glance.

"No I don't hate you," he answered, out of fear.

"So! everything's set, ain't it?" Sharkey cracked, extended both hands dramatically.

"What's fixed?" Pepper questioned, eying first Sharkey then the squirming Otis.

"Taking this fruit friend of yours to the cleaners."

"I won't rob my friend," Pepper declared flatly, boldly.

Sharkey sat up straight, his eyes burning on Pepper who refused to return his gaze.

"Oh, so you won't eh! You turned fruit, Pepper baby? You sucking on this Gill's rod now, instead of the other way around?"

"Shit!" Pepper exclaimed, gaining courage and daring.

Sharkey's voice became cool, collected.

"You know, Pepper baby, you know Otis and me, you know we're going to do what we came to New Orleans to do, don't you? You know we gonna make it mighty rough on you... and that fruit lover of yours... if you don't give us complete and whole cooperation."

Pepper began to really tremble now.

The jukebox was well into *Strangers in The Night*, one of Gill's favorites, and he blinked back a tear.

"I won't have Gill hurt, I mean that!"

"Listen to him, Shark," cried Otis in his midget voice.

"I'm listening," Sharkey said, cuttingly. "So you mean that? Oh, Pepper baby, you gonna get your head torn instead of your ass this time. And I'd hate to mess up that purty white hair and that tanned skin, honest. Now you listen to me," he leaned over Pepper like a dark omen, his huge hand pressing into his chest, "now I like you, you know that, and I liked plugging you but don't you go using my like for you as something to hold over my head. Now I'm gonna lay out the map and you better read it, see! Otis and me, we gotta blow this town, understand? We gotta blow it, and fast! Well, the way I see it this fruit's got a car, duds, lettuce, and a lot of loot stashed around. It'll be as easy as fuckin' a whore."

"You ought to know about that!" Pepper snapped, as if from a whim of furious jealousy.

"I don't fuck nobody but you, baby," Sharkey said, as if by that expression he put everything right between them. "Now you do like I say, and you can keep that purty face and that fruit."

Pepper glared at him for a brief moment, as if he did not believe Sharkey's threats, remembering, as if from another world, another life, Sharkey's body hovering over him in warm, belated passion, so glowing and provocative once... now so hard, so utterly cold!

"What if I refuse," he said, drawing mercilessly on his luck.

Sharkey's eyes turned white. "Now you ain't gonna go and do a crazy thing like that, now are you?"

"Better listen to him, Pepper box," Otis advised, as his eyes scanned the bar, picked out faces individually. "Man, this joint is working alive with queers!"

Sharkey turned a belligerent face to Otis.

"Lay off 'em! You want one of them silly faggots to squeal to the fuzz? Ain't you got no brains?"

"Shark! I was just looking! Crap, I'd use my hand before I'd let one of them sissies hang onto my rod."

"All I want you to do," Sharkey went on, turning his attention again to Pepper. "All I want you to do, baby, is to get that fruit out of town. I don't care how, but just get him out, and just open up them locks so Otis and me can pass... that's all!"

A slinky-looking man with blond curly hair swished by their table, gave them the fisheye. He went toward the men's room. Otis got up and followed.

"I don't know if I can manage all that or not," Pepper kept saying drudgingly, watching Sharkey's annoyed expression as he noticed Otis following the man into the head. "Gill... he... don't go out much unless I go too."

"Well, ain't that lovey-dovey," Sharkey said with hateful mockery. "You can think of something. You better, if you want to keep that fruit looking sexy."

Pepper looked at Sharkey in acid disgust, almost hurtingly. In his fear and apprehension for Gill's safety and his, he still had room in his compassion to think of him and Sharkey together, the way they had once been in Angola. Though Sharkey had been savage, ruthless, senseless, the memory of those sexual charades still haunted, and the dark power of Sharkey's beautiful body over his, doing things to him, he could not forget. Would never forget. And he asked shyly, now that Otis was out of earshot, "Sharkey, why you doing this to me... of all people... me?"

Sharkey hung his dark head for a brief moment, his long black hair tumbling into his eyes.

"I don't know, baby," he whispered, almost reverently. "Pressed into it, I guess. A man does a lot of things he don't want to when he's being chased by the fuzz. I can't go back to the can, baby. Never! Not ever!"

The ring of his voice both chilled and frightened Pepper, and he understood in part what Sharkey felt at this moment. Understood it in his frantic desire to hang on to what he and Gill had, their work, their life together, and he too cried out defensively, though silently the cry of the ravished, in his tortured mind he saw Angola and the harshness of life behind those awesome walls, saw with a wild terror in his heart that if he helped Sharkey and Otis he may have to return... everything lost!

"Don't make me do this, please!" he whimpered, near an outburst of wild tears. "Sharkey, please... please don't make me do this to Gill!"

"I gotta baby! I just gotta!" was all Sharkey would say,

shaking his huge elklike head. "I love to fuck you, honest. But I just gotta! I ain't ever going back to the can! I just ain't!"

Otis returned to the table, sat down sheepishly, grinned at Sharkey in a shameless grin which made Pepper instantly hate him.

"Look what I got," he cried like a child with a bright new toy, holding up his arm to reveal a stunning gold watch strapped to his wrist.

"What did I tell you about rolling fruits!" Sharkey stormed, glaring at him hotly. "You want the fuzz on top of us like a duck on a June bug?"

"Ah, Shark," Otis protested, too proud of his take to be wrathful. "That guy won't squeal. He's out cold."

"What!" Sharkey stormed, grabbing Otis's arm and ripping off the watch and thrusting it into his pocket. "You hit him when you was in the head? You flipped?"

Otis smiled triumphantly.

"Yeah! Let him have it in the puss while he was on the commode."

8

"It's a strange, strange world we live in, Master Jack. No hard feelings if I never look back. Although you broke my heart, I still love you... Master Jack."

The words were coming in from Gill's Mini Hi-Fi, a black ebony model from Gimbels, a lilting, feminine voice which haunted Pepper at the moment to distraction. Though it was his favorite popular tune, and in part had become his motto, it gave voice at precisely the wrong time, and magnified the hour, blowing it out of proportion, making the hot August night seem unreal, almost like a nightmare from which he hoped to wake, but somehow could not.

A car horn was honking down on Rampart, and Gill was in a perplexity to leave, scurrying here and there to secure his enormous cuff-links, his watch, a one last glance in the gilded, full-length mirror to check his immaculate Molana plaid in antique gold Dacron suit, his pale yellow shirt, his russet tie.

"Well, how do I look?" he asked Pepper, as he hurried through the living room and into the golden-lit hall. He paused at the steps and gazed back at Pepper, a long, thoughtful look, as if he regretted leaving. "Can't you at least say something?"

"You look... wonderful," Pepper said at last, his voice a series of hoarse tremors. And he meant this profoundly. He had never seen Gill more handsome, or more desirable, now that he knew he would never see him again. It was Wednesday 23rd, 1967, the eve of Gill's birthday, and Pepper, utilizing all his guile, had persuaded Norman Lirette to give him a birthday party, predominantly to get Gill out of the house for an evening, and to have it set up for Sharkey and Otis's invasion.

He had been harassed constantly by them for the past two weeks, threats, warnings, repeated promises of assaults if he did not get Gill out of the mansion long enough for them to, as they solely put it, "Take him to the cleaners!"

Gill rarely ever made trips out of town, or even left the house unless he insisted that Pepper accompany him. And Pepper was at a loss on how to maneuver a plausible excuse for his being absent. Finally, after a week's mental anguish, fearful what Sharkey and Otis would do to him physically if he did not comply to their demands, he had hit on the idea of Gill's birthday. It had been difficult. In the first place Gill wanted them to have a nice dinner at home, by candlelight, and with all the trimmings. Secondarily, he had tried to coax Pepper into attending the party in his honor, and at that moment still had not given up. Though Norman still blew his horn, Gill came back into the hallway where Pepper stood, and he caught his arm.

"Please, baby," he pleaded, his eyes naked with the misery of having to endure a boring all-faggot party without Pepper's masculine presence. "I'm going to simply die of boredom if you don't dress and come along. It just won't be a party without you, and you know it. There's yet time. I'll call Norman in for a drink while you change."

"And spoil our fun afterwards," Pepper had said, feeling a sharp pain in his throat for having to lie to Gill, the one person who had befriended him in all the world, the only one he could trust. And he added contempt to his lie by saying, yet out of last resort, "My surprise will be when you get back from the party... just you and me!"

Indeed, it would be a surprise, but not as Gill had concluded in his thoughts. Reinforced by his love for Pepper, he took what he said as a prelude to something better when he came home... a surprise birthday party Pepper had privately planned for him no doubt, a gift, maybe to give himself more congruously sexually as a secretive addition to their love. Smiling an impatient smile, he kissed Pepper on the cheek and bounded down the Valentino-tiled steps to the waiting car.

At the sight of him going into the darkness, out of his life forever, Pepper clutched at his heart with a trembling hand, and wished a thousand times he had never seen Sharkey Rider or Otis Pigott. For them, he was having to give up the one thing he really wanted... Gill's love and admiration, the one tangible thing he wanted... this house, the security and hope it contained within its walls. They were forcing him, by threat and malice, to forfeit for their sake his one ambition left, to succeed as a model builder with Gill, to build for himself a future on Gill's talent and knowledge, gifts he gave so freely, so open-heartedly.

Sick in both mind and body, sicker still with himself, his cowardice for not telling Gill of Sharkey and Otis's intentions, of not trying to stop them by police force before he lost Gill, everything, he went into the library and fixed himself a strong drink of three fourths whiskey and one fourth coke, a limp or two of ice. Then with his drink, he sat down and waited.

"It seemed like something I had to finish," he related to Gill later, when it was over and done and the agony of his role began to really soak in. "Like a book I started reading or a movie only half seen, or one of your models. I had to see it through to the end. It was almost like a nightmare I had to dream until it was complete, to die in it, or to live on after it was over."

What was to take place that night he felt profoundly that he could not control nor divert. Destiny had set the game. Sharkey and Otis had called the shots, and he had to react as

they had dictated. Like Russian Roulette. Even if he knew the bullet was in the chamber his next turn around, he would still have to pull the trigger, play the game as only the game could be played.

Pepper Lorrie had no qualms about calling the police, to become the "Stoll Pigeon" in Otis's and Sharkey's eyes. Once, while in Angola, he card what they thought of him, cared about a lot of nonsense which inmates seemed to set a great value on, things which meant nothing really. Now, all he cared about was Gill, his friend... and if he must say it... his lover... and the future Gill had so successfully mapped out for him, the start in life he would have under Gill's supervision and guidance.

Otis and Sharkey intended to destroy all that, unless he complied to their greedy, lawless whims. They who appreciated nothing. They would destroy both him and Gill, and with as much conscienceless effort as if they were destroying insects beneath their heels.

Yet, as he sat in the gloomy library darkness holding his drink, he knew that he was utterly helpless to divert their aim. Helpless to protect Gill, the things he most loved. For, mainly, he considered faintfully that he would lose in either case. If they informed Gill that he was an ex-con, a street-walking hustler, making up that little scheme about being a photographer just to gain admittance to his home, he would lose Gill's love and respect, his job and his last hope of a future. And if he let Sharkey and Otis pillage the place, take everything, he would lose still, for what could he tell Gill after it was done? Nothing! That was why, a moment ago when Gill was going merrily down the steps he was telling him good-bye in his heart.

Tonight, when it was over, he would leave, leave this house, Gill, his work, leave New Orleans and never come back. Where he would go he did not have the vaguest notion. For he would be breaking parole then, and the police would be on his tail, too!

So, embalmed on fear, the outcome, the drink burning his guts, making him a little dizzy, he sat stone-faced and thought of all these things... waiting!

He didn't have too long to wait.

He heard footsteps on the back stairs. He had left the back door and the garage entrance unlocked on purpose, and the heavy treads mingled with the soft, muffled tones on the shallow steps told him frantically that they belonged to Sharkey and Otis.

A moment more and they had advanced down the wide hall and into the library... inebriated! Sodden drunk!

"We got picked up by a couple of loaded fruits in a bar on Bourbon," Sharkey said in greeting wobbling on into the deeply carpeted room. His long black hair was in wild tangles, and his pale eyes were paler than Pepper had ever seen them, and to add

to this sudden fear he looked ferocious, dangerous as an animal let out of a cage.

"Wanted to buy is New Orleans," Otis cried, coughing, his face silvery with sweat, his oily hair looking like it had been doused.

"Yeah, I bet," Pepper said boldly, perhaps too boldly, for he flinched under Sharkey's despotic gaze.

"You... you keep your fruity mouth shut!" Sharkey bellowed, lunging toward Pepper, who backed away. "Sitting up here on your mighty throne, giving yourself airs! You're an ex-con, just the same as Otis and me, and don't you forget it!"

"Some gratitude!" Pepper flung back at him, the strongly mixed drink fortifying his temper, the long weeks of tenseness, with every nerve keyed, at last breaking inside him. "My life is being ruined on account of you and Otis. I've gone and done what you asked. So do what you intend to do and get out!"

"We're gonna do just that... be as quiet as little mice," Sharkey cried, wavering on his feet. His gaze shifted from Pepper to the bar, went greedily over the pyramids of liquors and wines. He picked up a bottle, jerked out the cork stopped with his teeth, and turned it to his lips slothfully. It ran out of the corners of his mouth, and dripped off the end of his chin. "Yeah!" he grinned, "quiet as a little mouse. And if you want GRATITUDE, Pepper baby. This big root of mine will give you plenty of GRATITUDE, right up the ass. The way you love it!"

He reached out frantically, caught Pepper behind the neck, jerked him to him swiftly and planted a kiss directly on his lips.

"Lay off that shit!" Otis said, wobbling like a cork on water. "We got a job to pull, 'fore that fruit gets back and spoils it all."

"He better not come back," Sharkey warned, and his eyes intensified his words, his voice. "Hear that, Pepper baby." He gave him a crude shake. "If he does... he's a dead duck!"

"A dead queer duck!" Otis chuckled. Then, grabbing one of the flagons of whiskey, he swilled it down, all the while swaying about the room, boots dragging carelessly on the rich carpeting. "Man! What a haul! What a perfect score!" His dark eyes rolled as he devoured all the beautiful furnishings with his leering gaze. "You done right well for yourself, Pepper baby, right well! Have to hand it to you, baby! You fixed us up!"

"You fixed yourself up," Pepper said with desperation in his voice. "I've got nothing to do with it!"

Sharkey turned like a cobra, and shook a finger at Pepper.

"I warned you once about that mouth! You getting to be a smart ass! Just keep it up... I'll fuck the sass outa you!"

With a bottle in each hand, they roamed from room to room, taking in the spectacle of their take. When they returned they looked paler than before, waned and more unstable on their feet. They had to hold onto the furnishings for support, and the liquor was strung on the carpet. In their gropings, tables were overturned, books and glasses and fabulous statues tumbling to the floor, breaking, shattering into fragments. They slumped into chairs, their eyes film covered, their hair in wet ringlets down over their foreheads, slovenly drunk, their minds whirling with the determination to commit something of the base, something cruel and carnal, and their slumped bodies seemed to flow with these frightful rhythm, and looking at them questionably, terror in his heart, Pepper hated himself for ever befriending them in the first place and saw, in their devilish demeanor, their obvious despotism for destruction; his own destruction. They, in their wild drunkenness, were the physical picture of himself, the physical forerunner of his own doom, the sad and wild counterparts that, in momentary form, was the image of his future.

In a sudden fit of restlessness, they pulled themselves from the chairs, got themselves another bottle from the bar, and again began to ramble, examining this and that, and all under Pepper's uniting gaze. They wobbled down the hall, into both bedrooms, then kicked open the door to the workshop.

At that, a sudden chill ran up Pepper's spine. He rushed down the hall in a frenzy of protectiveness.

"Stay outa there!" he cried out in warning, jealousy guarding his and Gill's most precious creation... the miniature models. "You can't hock anything in there, so get out!" At the sight of them in that room, among the beautiful models, he went momentarily blind. He grabbed Otis by the shirt and gave him a shove, frantic to clear the air, this almost holy place, of their venom.

Otis, in a small fury, jerked free.

"Why... you son of a bitch!"

His beaded eyes, glaring at Pepper, were like tiny lights, and in his sudden drunkenness, his furious rage broke and turned into something murderous. Seeing a broom which stood in the corner, one Pepper always used to sweep up the debris after he and Gill had finished a model, he picked it up and swung it in a full arch. It struck several of the models, knocked them off their platforms and they crashed to the floor in a disheveled heap.

Suddenly, keyed in with his drunkenness, the sounds of things falling and breaking under his frantic power, he went hopelessly wild. With the broom going round and round, his small body the hub of this crazy, destructive wheel, he moved down the

length of the workshop, taking everything in his delirious force. The tiny, intricate ante-bellum homes, the trees, the carriages, the people as if under the powers of a miniature hurricane, were caught up in the flying broom, sailed through the air, and crashed against the opposite walls.

"Sharkey! Stop him, stop him!" Pepper cried, trying to edge in on the circling broom which now became a slicing, murderous disk. His own mind became something of a murderous rage, as he saw all his and Gill's painstaking work becoming a mass of wreck and letter, and with an almost disheveled rage, he beat on Sharkey's chest, trying to wake him from his stupor, his lunaticlike drunkenness, and help him save some of the models or they all would be destroyed.

Against the noises of things falling and breaking, of Otis's wild, devilish screams, his hideous, drunken laughs, Sharkey too became almost instantly a human turned beast. With one huge hand, like lightening, he flung out and struck Pepper full across the face.

"What do I care," he growled with an insulting laugh. "You little fruit! What do I give a damn if he wrecks the joint. Let him have his little party... let off some steam!"

"That's years of work he's tearing up," Pepper screamed, the impact of Sharkey's fist knocking him against the door fading. And without noticing any pain, or, if there was pain his brain was too occupied to take it in, to register, he glared at the wreckage like a crazy person. Seeing it all explode before his very eyes, it was enough to unhinge his mind. "It'll take years to build them all back," he whimpered, as his and Gill's dream would become a scattered heap of rubble, the houses smashed, the platforms upturned, the inanimate life of another time again destroyed, as once in an animate life it had been destroyed by the Civil War. "Years... years!" he lamented, seeing, but not really believing.

"Well, you can do something else... in the meantime," Sharkey said in a thick tongue, his gaze suddenly very strangely lit. Like a giant in the semi-darkness, his broad shoulders looked up and over Pepper who backed back against the door fading, helpless, too fearful to move. "Get my rod in... in your little honeypot. Give you something to do!" Grasping Pepper by the arms with both hands, he pulled him into the hall, and into one of the bedrooms. Like a demon gone mad, his intentions heightened, intensified by the constant noise, the crashing sounds in the workshop, he tore away Pepper's clothes... then his own.

"Please!" Pepper cried out, remembering, as if from nightmare, those haunting trysts in Angola Sharkey had taken him so unmercifully and, in taking, burning Pepper's memory with fire-hot flame.

"Don't you please me!" Sharkey growled, flipping Pepper over on his stomach, and binding arms and hands in a viselike grip. "You got it coming! And you gonna get it!"

With a memory of expectation almost more than he could take, Pepper cringed as he felt the huge dark body of Sharkey slide upon him, felt the wiry hair burn his buttocks, chafe against his inner thighs as they were being spread by Sharkey's enormous limbs. He cringed again as Sharkey's hot organ probed for the soft flesh lips it would eventually find, knowing the awesome pain he would feel once it found its lovely home. And when he did—Sharkey now even more murderous, more lustful primed on drink—Pepper screamed.

"Take it like a man! You little bitch!" Sharkey cried hoarsely slapping Pepper on the back of the head, then smothering his screams with a huge hand cupped over his mouth.

Pepper squirmed, but even that only intensified the pain, only allowed the organ to penetrate further, and to give venom to Sharkey's sexual whims, more perverse power to his wayward rape.

So, as Otis went from room to room turning over chairs breaking things in his drunken wake, Pepper lay beneath the drunk body of Sharkey whimpering and squirming, as Sharkey's enormous tool dug deeper and deeper into his rectum, gouging out a hole far into the recesses of his belly, making a permanent home for his seed. The weight of this body became an almost inhuman thing, like a smelly, sweat-drenched animal in the throes of an attack, an ape in the coupling of its mate, fiercely dark and savagely hairy, each hair burning like a match on Pepper's smooth behind, his thighs, and his nuts, each time Sharkey gave a lunge, swung back and forth hitting Pepper below his rectum like stones in a sling.

With a wild grunt Sharkey shot his sperm. In that instant his whole body stiffened, as if he had been felled by a blow on the back of the head, as if sex had come upon him from behind. Then he let out contented sighs. His huge body slackened, moist, warm, and he slid off Pepper's body. As he did so, he pulled Pepper with him, their nakedness all liquescent with sweat, sperm. He slumped back down on the bed, moaning drunkenly, grabbed Pepper's head and centered it over his prick.

"Clean it up for me, baby!" he sighed a hungry sigh, peering down at Pepper's face buried in his hairy crotch. "Lick it good! Lick it good!"

His head in the vise grip of Sharkey's enormous hands, hands now like instruments of steel, Pepper squirmed as Sharkey's prick probed around him, his eyes, his nose, then forcefully into his mouth. He could taste the warmth of the enormous flesh head, the hot sperm, could smell the rancid hair,

the sweat, and he wanted to vomit, and out of all the noise and the plundering and the agony of his face buried in the hair-filled loins came the low, murmuring voice of Sharkey darkly bending over him.

"Sugar! I love for you to do that... love it... honest!" And with animal, moaning intonations, slobbering out the words drunkenly, "Kiss it, baby. Love it. It ain't had no loving since... since you flew the coop!"

There was a wild noise now in the hall, then abrupt silence. Feet were hurrying in their direction. The silhouette of a body loomed in the shadowy doorway.

"What in the name of God?" came a familiar voice.

Pepper looked up. Gaspd. It was Gill. Behind him, coming up now, was Otis. He had found a gun, a double barreled quail rifle, and he thrust it in the middle region of Gill's back.

"No shit outa you... understand?"

Suddenly, Sharkey came alive, sobered. He leaped up from the bed, as his prick slipped out of Pepper's mouth with a loud pop, like pulling a cork out of a bottle.

"We're fucked!" he yelled, shoving Gill back into the hallway under the lights.

Pepper got up from the floor with the slow gropings of a man struck blind. In the hall he looked at Gill, one sad, forlorn look, and the eyes that returned his gaze were the most terrible he was ever to see. They were lights eaten up with turmoil, of stark terror, and alarm, and puzzlement, and mingled with these emotions was the awesome reality of Pepper's betrayal, his disloyalty.

"Gill! Gill! I'm sorry!" he whimpered, as their whole life fell away at that moment. And lifting one hand he wiped his mouth, as if by that one gesture he was cleansing all he and Sharkey had done together, coming up out of the slime of sex, making himself clean and pure once more.

"You too, Brutus!" Gill replied, as his gaze was cold and puzzling.

"What we gonna do with him?" Otis questioned, looking sheepishly, nervously at Sharkey, then at Gill, as if Sharkey was the fountain of wisdom and could solve all the problems of the world.

"Get him in here, tie him up!" Sharkey said without thinking.

Under Pepper's watchful, terrorized gaze, they striped Gill of his clothes, turned him face down on the sweated, rumpled sheets, and spread-eagled him. With a pocket knife Sharkey cut cords from the blinds and tied his arms and legs at the wrists and ankles and tied them to the bedposts. Then, with the russet necktie Gill had worn to the party he looped it around his neck,

drew it tight. Gill gasped, then quieted as Otis punched him in the behind with the point of the rifle.

"Keep still," Otis demanded in a demented tone, "or I'll ram this up your ass a foot deep."

"Why don't you get a little?" Sharkey said, grinning at Otis, then looking at Gill's spread nakedness. "It's there ready and waiting, just unzip and stick it in!"

Otis's gaze slid over Gill's exposed behind.

"I don't go that route," he said, refusing point blank.

"Looks like some fine... stuff," said Sharkey, bending playfully and running his hand over Gill's cheeks. "Could... tap that myself."

"Shit man!" Otis stormed, frowning. "We gotta get up some loot and shag outta here. Ain't Pepper enough... in one night?"

"You load the car, I'll be down in a minute," Sharkey said determined, his gaze hard, lustful. "You two punks get outa here, don't want nobody watching me crack my nuts." He pushed Otis and Pepper into the hall roughly, and slammed the door with a loud bang. He went back to the bed and crawled upon Gill, who let out a piercing scream.

Outside in the hall, Otis began to move fast.

"Gas in the car, plenty of it, I mean?" he demanded of Pepper, ramming him in the gut with the rifle.

"It's all tended to," Pepper said. He had often serviced the car for Gill, and having it serviced that afternoon had not given Gill cause for suspicion.

Otis began to cull out objects in the living room, picking some of them up, putting others down, culling them for their pawning value.

"Got any cameras, fieldglasses, radios?" he asked snappishly, rummaging through the debris he had so drunkenly created. "You can always get more for them."

Pepper showed him where they were. Otis looped them over his shoulder, then cleaned out Pepper's clothes closet with one sweep, taking racks and all. He went down the back steps with a bound, but was back again in a moment.

Sharkey opened Gill's bedroom door. He tried to put on his pants but wobbled back and forth, as if the house was a ship in full sail. His organ wobbled back and forth too, and he let out a curse when the skin caught in the zipper.

"That fruit is loose as a ten-year-old cow!" he said rakishly, pointing back to the dark interior.

"Let's get going," Otis said as if he was now heading the show. Then, as if he had been heralded by some noiseless lure, his eyes beaded, shifted toward Gill's bedroom. He went in, but Sharkey grabbed his arm and flung him back into the hall.

"What's eating you?" he cried hoarsely. "This only gonna

take a minute."

Otis went back into the room, Sharkey and Pepper following.

"I hate queers!" he said. Sticking the rifle up Gill's behind, he pulled the trigger. The dark room exploded in gas chamber green.

"Goddamned!" Sharkey screamed, and they both instantly panicked.

Like frantic, driven animals, they grabbed up articles and hurried down the back stairs to the waiting car. On the way, Sharkey dropped portable T.V. The tube burst into a million fragments. He picked it up anyway, his logic now completely unhinged, and they disappeared into the garage. There was a grind of a motor, the scream of tires, as they shot out of the garage around the house, and down into the street

Pepper flipped on the lights in Gill's room and went to him. His whole backside was a cave of torn flesh and blood. But he was yet alive. In a welter of fresh tears, Pepper fell down beside him and began to stroke his face.

"Gill! Gill! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he murmured "But they made me! They forced me... honest!"

Gill looked at him and nodded, the glint in his pale eyes telling him he understood.

Pepper immediately got up and called the police.

9

Gill St. Julien lived only two days. He died the after his birthday, August 25th, 1967 in the Charity Hospital on Tulane avenue. The double-barreled shotgun, with both chambers emptying into Gill's rectum, had splinted the spine all the way to the shoulder blades, and had all but disemboweled him, severing his kidneys, his lungs, and sprinkling buckshot into the lower regions of his heart.

The shots, in splintering his spine, disabled his speech. He could only murmur undistinguishable words, sometimes a short sentence understood only by persons who had known him intimately over a period of years. But during those two days and nights Pepper remained with him constantly and he told him everything, his year at Angola, Sharkey Rider, Otis Pigott, the sex life he had dejectedly endured with Sharkey, his scheme to get even, his days as a street walking hustler, his disguise as a photographer, his goal to single him as his victim. Told him everything, sometimes with tears, sometimes with uncontrollable sobs, sometimes sober, stone-faced, remorseful.

At six-fifteen on the 25th, for a brief, elated moment, Gill's voice returned. He asked that the blinds be opened to let in the light. But they were open, and the late afternoon light was flooding the room from floor to ceiling. Somehow Pepper knew the time had come. He went to the bed, leaned over him and asked him to forgive him. Gill nodded, blinked back a tear and closed his eyes.

With his expression drawn, his face death white, Pepper tiptoed from the room. He went out onto Tulane avenue and walked to the Garden of the Americas on Basin street. He sat down on a bench below the statue of Simon Bolivar and stared absently into the flowing water that leaped over rocks into a pink marble pool.

He was struck dumb. He couldn't speak nor cry nor leap up in hysterical spasms. He could only sit there and stare into nothing. Finally he smoked a cigarette, then glanced at his watch. It was eight minutes past seven. The sun had descended beyond the tops of the buildings, and there was a golden sheen splashed on everything, the walls, the cars, the slate gray streets, even on the heads of the hundreds of people going up and down Canal.

At exactly that same instant a policeman tapped Sharkey Rider and Otis Pigott on the shoulder in the ticket line of a Florida Greyhound bus station. It was in the town of St. Petersburg, near Pinellas Park. The car which belonged to Gill

was found abandoned on highway 19 north of Port Richey. It was sitting on a white shell shoulder, the doors open, leaning a little to the east and ironically about twenty yards from a little white sign which, along with a series of similar signs, formed a leading trail to a little church in New Port Richey. On each sign was a verse from the Ten Commandments. On the sign nearest the abandoned car were the words: THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.

When the police examined the contents of the car they found the following articles: Pepper's clothes, which the two ex-cons had not bothered to change into, the broken T.V. set, a piece of rope from venetian blinds, a shotgun, the murder weapon, and a fifth of Old Crow, the seal still intact. On the front seat floor were two nickels a penny and a dollar bill. And in the glove compartment an official road map of Florida with routes marked off with a red felt-tipped pen, a pack of peppermint gum with two slices removed, a rubber, a large jar of vaseline with the cap unscrewed, a wrist watch with the band broken, a penny box of matches, and a ladies' scarf.

All that was reported that Sharkey said when policeman intercepted him was: "We've been fucked!" Otis, reportedly, said nothing. He just there trembling, his beaded eyes locked on the policeman, a pleading gaze, as if begging for help.

In a little cemetery directly behind the St. Louis Cathedral Pepper slumped in the soft, dewy grass. Confetti, amethyst and topaz and fired with sapphires, sifted above him, then settled on him like a fine misty rain. He lay sprawled on his back, watching the black spires of the Cathedral stab the empty heavens. The moon came through a patch of frosty white clouds like a silvery fish through a net.

Somewhere in the velvet darkness came the cry of a young girl, then cursing. A dog barked faintly. Somewhere from a far-off tavern came an echo of music. The hollow sound of a ship's stack in the harbor was like the herald of doom.

Pepper began to sob drunkenly but almost sanely. The tears ran down his face and dripped on the grass, mingling with the dew.

"Gill! I love you... I love you... please come... back."